

**The Reception of the Works of Contemporary
Chinese Glam-Writers in Mainland China**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the reception of five contemporary Chinese glam-writers and their works in mainland China. It explores three different types of reception by three reading constituencies: literary critics, actual women readers, and participants on the glam-writers' personal blogs. Drawing in part on western reception theory and reader-response criticism, this thesis focuses on the role of the reader in reading and interpreting the glam-writers' works and makes an original empirical contribution to audience research in mainland China where such research is as yet not developed. By adopting a range of qualitative research methods, I investigate the ways in which contemporary Chinese readers understand and respond to a particular type of women's literature at the turn of the twenty-first century. I demonstrate that Chinese readers are not merely passive recipients of the literary works, or 'cultural dupes' (Hall 1981), but both savage – in the sense of severe – and savant readers of popular culture. This also means that the negative influences of these works, as predicted by Chinese mainstream literary critics, are not evident in actual readers' responses to these texts.

To My Parents and Haiyang

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Although more and more contemporary Chinese writers and their works have been introduced to the west in translation, not much is known outside of sinology in western countries about Chinese literature written for a Chinese audience in mainland China (Wang Ning 2008). Even less is known about *how contemporary Chinese literature is received by its mainland Chinese audience* either in China or in the west. This thesis therefore focuses on one particular kind of literature, women's writing in contemporary mainland China since the late 1990s, that of the so-called glam-writers, or beauty writers (meinü zuojia), and the reception of their works by its indigenous audience. It is intended to make a - partly empirically based - contribution to research on actual Chinese readers' views regarding a particular set of writings. This kind of research is currently not developed in mainland China, and it is this that makes my thesis an original contribution to knowledge.

My first encounter with the glam-writers' works was the short story 'Goodbye Vivian' (Gaobie Wei'an, 1998), written by Ann Baby when I was in secondary school in China. In this story, Ann Baby fabricates a virtual relationship between a man and a woman who get to know each other on the internet but never meet in the real world. While my classmate, from whom I borrowed the book,¹ spelt out her fascination with the heroine's decadent lifestyle and ambiguous attitude toward love and sex portrayed in the novel, I was more concerned with issues beyond the storyline itself. For example, I asked myself questions such as 'what made the writer write about a virtual relationship between two strangers', 'was this story a traditional romance or an innovative type of literary genre in terms of writing', 'what kinds of effects would this

¹ The short story 'Goodbye Vivian' was first written and published on the internet in 1998. Not until January 2000 was the homonymous collection of short stories, *Goodbye Vivian*, published in paper form. The book consisted of twenty-three short stories including 'Goodbye Vivian' and one of Ann Baby's best-known stories, 'July and Ansheng' (Qiyue yu Ansheng). For information about 'Goodbye Vivian', see <http://www.21gbook.com/an/a10.htm>, accessed on 12/12/2007.

story, or the book have on its readers', and 'to what degree would readers' responses to this book vary'. It was initially because of these questions that I began to keep an eye on the readership of this glam-writer's works.

By the time I read the paper copy of the short story collection *Goodbye Vivian* in 2000, online versions of this book and other works by Ann Baby had been widely available on websites such as rongshuxia.com. Her popularity on the internet appeared evident, as discussion by reading groups and fan clubs of issues such as unattainable relationships, raised in her works, pervaded reading forums and the book review sections of certain websites.² In the same year, a group of young women writers emerged and received critical attention from literary critics and scholars, some of whom viewed the works by these women, quickly termed 'glam-writers' or 'beauty writers', as exerting negative influences on their readers in line with the state's ban and official description of Wei Hui's notorious novel *Shanghai Baby* (Shanghai Baobei, 1999): 'corruption, degeneration, contaminated by western culture'³ (my translation). With the impression that literary critics were uneasy about the influences these glam-writers' works would have on their readers, I began to be interested in exploring the actuality of reading these writers' works, and to examine the possible effects of these works on their actual readers.

My interest in the reception of these writers' works was also informed by my concern with the relationship between Chinese literature, women's writing in particular, and China's modernization and participation in the globalization of culture and the economy. Coming from an educational background in society, culture and media, with little professional training in literature, I primarily concentrated my research on the reception of the glam-writers' works from a socio-cultural perspective.

² See <http://article.rongshuxia.com/viewart.rs?aid=14603>, and <http://www.rongshuxia.com/Reader/21426.aspx>, accessed on 13/02/2008. Although Ann Baby's works were much discussed on several websites where she first published her work, book-related issues were not so much discussed on her personal blog, as I shall show in Chapter 6.

³ See http://club.163.com/viewElite.m?catalogId=4831&eliteld=4831_100d22f00c10005, accessed on 12/02/2008.

In this Introduction, I shall offer a brief history of the development of Chinese women's writing in order to outline the social and cultural context for the later discussion of the glam-writers and the reception of their works. Thus, I shall first describe briefly the historical development of Chinese women's literature from the pre-modern periods to the turn of the twenty-first century. Then I shall examine the economic and socio-political factors which played a role in the production and reception of women's writing since the Reform Era which began in 1978⁴. I shall also reflect upon the influence of western culture and feminism on Chinese women's literature, and put contemporary China in its global economic and cultural context. Last but not least, I shall present an outline of the five selected glam-writers and their works, followed by a brief comment on the criticism of their writing by professionals, literary critics, academics and lay readers. I shall also touch upon how the public reception of these writers' works has been influenced by the media in relation to the critique of consumer culture.

A Brief History of Women's Writing in Mainland China

I situate my interest in Chinese women's writing in the latter's historical roots. Gradually, I have found myself becoming more interested in the ambivalent and contradictory nature of, and changing relationship between, women and literature in China. It is this interest which drives me to look back to Chinese women and literary history as early as the first century in the late Han dynasty (approx. AD 25 – AD 220). A traditional Chinese saying states: 'nūzi wu cai bian shi de' (for women, lack of [literary] talent is a virtue).⁵ Confucian doctrine developed a notion of 'separate spheres for women and men' and canonized women for their 'virtue', *de* in Chinese, while acclaiming men for their (literary) talent, *cai* (Larson, 1998: 3). Throughout more than two thousand years of Chinese patriarchal society, Chinese women were expected to remain 'in a distinct and relatively rigid position' within the household

⁴ For further information about the periodization of Chinese literary development, see Appendix 1.

⁵ Although *cai* refers to a general notion of talent in Chinese, Larson (1998) translates *cai* as literary talent in her book *Women and Writing in Modern China*. I therefore borrow Larson's notion of *cai* as literary talent in this section.

(ibid), while men were free to function outside the domestic sphere, and had access to positions within the government, other forms of authority and, importantly for my thesis, literary culture (Tu Wei-ming 1996; Yao Xinzong 2000). According to Larson, by the late Ming and Qing dynasties, women's virtue, *de*, which was practiced through bodily restrictions such as chastity and foot-binding, was highly praised as 'the essential, orthodox marker of femininity' (Larson, 1998: 2). Confucianism asserted women's three obediences and four virtues as the essence of, and moral guidance for, Chinese women.⁶ In sharp contrast, the talent *cai* was extensively referred to as a marker of masculinity in pre-modern China, which was transcendent and intellectual if possessed by men, but dangerous and prohibited if women aspired to it. Women with excessive talent were constructed as persons who would most likely suffer 'poverty, misfortune, or early death' (Liu Yongcong, 1993: 137). Liu Yongcong bases this assertion on a number of actual examples of Chinese women writers or poets who suffered this but there is, of course, no direct causal relationship between those sufferings and the fact that these women wrote, other than that literary talent in women was not fostered.

Despite a gendered historical social tradition, cultural norms and ideological atmosphere, where the moral virtue, *de* and the talent, *cai* were constructed as mutually exclusive in relation to Chinese women and literature, women's talent in the literary field was not easily dismissed or erased. There were at least four well-known *cainü* (talented women) worth mentioning in the pre-modern period: the historian, politician and writer Ban Zhao (49-120), and the three female poets Zhuo Wenjun (dates unknown), Cai Wenji (177-?), and Li Qingzhao (1084-1151) who emerged between the Han and Song dynasties⁷. Their works had a substantial influence on Chinese literary history, and they are considered part of China's most prized cultural heritage. However, since moral virtue for women was also a physical ordeal which

⁶ Women's three obediences are: obedience to the father before marriage, to the husband when married, and to the son in widowhood; and the four virtues are morality, proper speech, modest manners and good needlework.

⁷ See <http://www.mss-zone.com/archiver/?tid-384.html>, accessed on 27/06/2007; and <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/9054706.html>, accessed on 26/06/2007.

'contained, restricted, mutilated, and even effaced the body' (Larson, 1998: 43), and their gendered cultural tradition positioned women in the inner quarters of the house as wives and mothers, women writers in pre-modern China constructed females as weak, submissive, and inferior, utilizing the form of poetry, and extensively investing the 'female voice' with a tone described as melancholic, pathetic, and nostalgic (Liu Yongcong, 1993: 142).

The Confucian idea of 'separate spheres' for men and women was not merely a division of space, but a separation of the social and the personal, as well as a pervasive notion of a particular textual tradition. Chinese patriarchal culture reflected a widespread male indifference and ignorance toward the literary talents and efforts of women. Chinese women's sense of subjectivity was reduced to 'an extreme emotionalism and artificiality' (Liu Linsheng, 1919: n.p.). Thus this artificiality and a tendency toward melancholy and sadness became a specific trait of women's writing in pre-modern China. It was this emotional being to which women's supposed traits such as narrow-mindedness, weakness, jealousy, and victimization were connected. From this cultural position, Chinese women's entry into modern literature and modern society was not easy to accomplish.

Against this cultural and customary bias, Chinese intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century began to rethink the status and problems of women in the hope of reconstructing a national culture and tradition. In his book *Datong shu* ([Book of the Great Commonwealth], 1894), reformist Kang Youwei (1858-1927) proposed a standard uniform in the sense of dress for both men and women in order to eliminate the physical objectification and discrimination of women (Chang Hao, 1987: 61).

Although later accused by Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) of trying to establish Confucianism as a state religion (Chen Duxiu 1916), Kang actively defended women's equal rights and status. Likewise Tan Sitong (1865-1898) attacked the Confucian dogma of women's inferior role and subhuman status by criticizing the family as 'a virtual prison' and the desire of women as 'evil' (Chang Hao, 1987: 101).

Critiques from other reformists before the May Fourth movement (1919) decried the moral virtue de as a remnant of the past, and applauded the literary talent cai and women's literature (nüxing wenxue) as modern (ibid: 45-6).

Under the influence of western modernization and the first feminist movement of the early twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals such as Tan Sitong, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao (1873-1929),⁸ and later male writers Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967),⁹ Lu Xun (1881-1936),¹⁰ and Mao Dun (1896-1981),¹¹ to name just a few, took pains to fight for women's emancipation and liberation. Unlike the first feminist movement in most western countries which in some instances set itself apart from, if not against, nationalistic norms, feminism in the Chinese Republic at the beginning of the twentieth century was virtually 'an integral part of nationalism' (Beahan 1975; Zarrow 1988). In other words, Chinese women's development and liberation were closely related to that of the whole nation. Chinese feminism, combined with a socialist, revolutionary, and masculinist ideology, situated writers in a non-gendered position by allowing them to write but only in the interests of national unification. This is quite unlike literary developments in western countries at the time. It facilitated the production of women's writing - provided they supported the nationalist enterprise, they were actually allowed to write.

Not until the May Fourth movement in 1919 did Chinese women writers begin to appear as a group on the literary scene. This newly emerging group of modern women were called the New Woman (xin nüxing), and their literature was regarded as the New Literature (xin wenxue) in the New Period in modern China (Li Ziyun, 1994: 299). Women writers such as Ding Ling (1904-1986)¹² and Bing Xin (1900-1999)¹³ demanded 'freedom in love and marriage, self-liberation' and advocated

⁸ See <http://baike.baidu.com/view/1999.htm>, accessed on 22/08/2007.

⁹ See http://www.white-collar.net/01-author/z/44-zhou_zr/zhou_zr.html, accessed on 22/08/2007.

¹⁰ See <http://baike.baidu.com/view/2004.htm>, accessed on 22/08/2007.

¹¹ See <http://www.white-collar.net/01-author/m/04-maodun/maodun.html>, accessed on 22/08/2007.

¹² See http://www.white-collar.net/01-author/d/07-dingling/ding_ling.html, accessed on 20/08/2007.

¹³ See <http://www.bingxin.org/>, accessed on 10/08/2007.

slogans of 'democracy, sexual equality, and liberation of the self' (Li Ziyun: 300-1). In this they were not very different from feminist writers of the west of the early twentieth century. In one of her most famous stories, *Shafei nǚshi de riji* ([Miss Sophie's Diary], 1927),¹⁴ Ding Ling depicts a liberated young woman from a well-to-do family with the freedom to leave home in pursuit of higher education and to socialize freely with young men. Unfortunately, the young female protagonists in Ding Ling's novels do not seem to know what they really want, and are eventually 'deserted' by their partners for the sake of revolution.

Ding Ling was the first woman writer to indicate that 'revolution and love are mutually incompatible' (Li Ziyun, 1994: 301). This became a normative theme in 1930s leftist literature. While advocating freedom and equality between the sexes, Bing Xin still engaged with the issue of what is female and what is literary. In her later novel *Wo de fangdong* ([My Landlady], 1945), Bing Xin discussed the material difficulty of combining femaleness and literariness. Both Ding Ling's and Bing Xin's works were attacked by Chinese critics for excessively individualistic concerns with love and love conflicts, a focus on personal experience, and a narrow range of emotional concerns (Larson, 1998: 180).

To a certain extent, the notion of a contradiction between talent and moral virtue as essentially masculine and feminine continued in the early twentieth century. Even avant-garde women writers such as Ding Ling, Bing Xin, and Lu Yin (1898-1934)¹⁵ felt constrained to regard femaleness and producing literature as opposites. The protagonists that appeared in Bing Xin and Lu Yin's novels in the first half of the 1920s were generally male. When a female protagonist appeared in their texts as a woman who wrote, she usually wrote diaries and letters, quite often from a position of melancholy, passivity and illness. This echoed the old poetic 'literati-feminine' image identified by Maureen Robertson (1992: 69) as a dominant literary trope in pre-

¹⁴ See *Ding Ling Wenji* (Collection of Ding Ling's Writings 6, 1984).

¹⁵ See <http://www.lalabar.com/news/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=663>, accessed on 12/08/2007.

modern China.¹⁶

The notion of revolutionary literature (*geming wenxue*) prevailed in the Chinese literary field around the 1930s (Liu Jianmei, 2003: 163). The import of political discourse into the private space became a distinct characteristic of revolutionary literature. As critic Chen Shunxin (1995) states, love became revolutionized and the revolution became romanticized. Personal love was under strict censorship and controlled by revolutionary discourse. Images of women with complex personal desires and emotions became extinct from mainstream literature, except in the work of two female 'heretic' writers, Xiao Hong (1911-1942)¹⁷ and Zhang Ailing (also known as Eileen Chang) (1920-1995),¹⁸ who both from a 'woman's point of view' described women's 'sensitivities' and personal pursuit of love, and managed to 'leave a feminine touch on the writing of the 1930s and 1940s' (Li Ziyun, 1994: 303). The latter's most successful novel *Jinsuo ji* ([The Golden Cangue or The Story of A Golden Lock], 1943) did not engage with the social and political context of the 1940s.¹⁹ Instead, it delivered to readers an extreme emotionalism, escapism, pessimism and romanticism.

After 1949 when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded, women were encouraged to work outside the home and join literacy programs. Although the Communist party and official discourse upheld sexual equality and instituted equal political, economic, and cultural rights for women, discrimination against women still existed, as women were required to meet 'male standards of performance' and were encouraged to take 'pride in being masculine by trying to hide their own femininity' under Mao's regime (Li Ziyun, 1994: 304-5). During the Cultural Revolution, women were expected to be physically strong and economically independent through

¹⁶ Robertson labels the female voice in pre-Tang poetry as 'literati-feminine', which 'articulates an object for the fantasies of its readers, creating an iconic image of a woman which does not depend upon its referentiality to actual women' (1992: 69).

¹⁷ See http://www.white-collar.net/01-author/x/05-xiao_h/xiao_hong.htm, accessed on 13/08/2007.

¹⁸ See <http://school.btvu.org/yjrj/mjnz/wanganyi/wyz/zalji.htm>, accessed on 13/08/2007.

¹⁹ See http://www.white-collar.net/wx_hsz/xiandai/xd_35.htm, accessed on 25/07/2007.

entering the labour force, and undertaking all kinds of work (Evans, 1997: 49-55). They were also required to dress themselves in a masculinized fashion (see Figures 1.1-1.3 below).

Figure 1.1: Red Guards.



Women wore the same clothes as men during the Maoist period.

Source: http://www.shoujiz.net/ent/pop/ws/200704/20070413091052_30982.shtml, accessed on 23/08/2007.

Figure 1.2: Poster of Cultural Revolution I.



Men and women were obliged to read a selection of Mao's work and advocate the slogan:

Fight bourgeois counteraction and those who take the capitalist path (my translation).

Source:

<http://image.baidu.com/i?ct=503316480&z=0&tn=baiduimagedetail&word=%CE%C4%BB%AF%B4%F3%B8%EF%C3%FC&in=11&cl=2&cm=1&sc=0&lm=-1&pn=10&rn=1>, accessed on 26/08/2007.

Figure 1.3: Poster of Cultural Revolution II.



Men and women feel honoured to take an oath: to inherit Chairman Mao's unfulfilled wishes and carry on the proletariat revolution to the end (my translation).

Source:

<http://image.baidu.com/i?ct=503316480&z=0&tn=baiduimagedetail&word=%CE%C4%BB%AF%B4%F3%B8%EF%C3%FC&in=148&cl=2&cm=1&sc=0&lm=-1&pn=147&rn=1>, accessed on 26/08/2007.

From hairstyles to clothing, women's appearance was under strict surveillance by the state. Physical beauty and expressions of femininity in dress and comportment were treated with suspicion. Femininity continued to be viewed as a 'signifier of immorality and danger to men' through the 1950 and 1960s (Evans, 1997: 21). Within a social and political context in which femininity was suppressed and sexuality was constrained, revolutionary novels of these two decades largely presented women's sexuality as a 'dangerous and destructive political power in an extremely negative way' (Liu Jianmei, 2003: 197).

The year 1976 marked a dramatic shift in political, economic, and social policy (Li Ziyun, 1994: 360-3). Deng Xiaoping advocated reform and the opening-up policy, and eventually opened China to the outside world. A revival of not only the economy, but also of art and literature, took place in almost every stratum of society. During the reform years, much of the emphasis on the importance of education and re-education of girls and women dealt with women's self-development and self-improvement, as well as their 'acquisition of basic educational and vocational skills' in order to enter the workplace in an equal position with their male counterparts (Croll, 1995: 136). Women writers were inspired both financially and spiritually to take up their pens in the New Era (1978-).²⁰

There were at least four different types of literature that emerged in mainland China after the Cultural Revolution. The first type was 'scar literature' (shanghen wenxue). The representative women writers of scar literature are Dai Houying (b. 1938) and Zong Pu (b. 1928). It inaugurated the so-called New Era by 'documenting the physical and psychological horrors of the Cultural Revolution – drawing upon, and in turn refining, the bold language of the 'big character' posters that sprang everywhere in the PRC during the late 1970s.'²¹ Scar literature involved, for example, rewriting women's bodies and sexuality in an attempt to reveal 'the mental and physical pain and scars' of the Cultural Revolution years (Liu Jianmei, 2003: 197). The second was 'introspection literature' (fansi wenxue), which originated from, and was regarded as the development of, scar literature.²² As indicated by its name, introspection literature interrogated the political and cultural context for the traumatic narration in scar literature, questioning the reality of history and the role of individuals in relation to history. Later it placed its emphasis on rethinking about the humanness and values of human life. Ru Zhijuan (b. 1925) is one of the representative women writers of introspection literature.

²⁰ The New Era normally refers to the period after the year 1978, which is sometimes also called the Reform Era.

²¹ See <http://www.owl.net.rice.edu/~anth220/literature.html>, accessed on 29/08/2007.

²² See http://baike.baidu.com/view/593487.htm?fr=ala0_1, accessed on 12/12/2009.

Reform literature (gaige wenxue) was the third type of literature which emerged immediately after implementation of the reform policy.²³ Writers of reform literature did not only pay attention to the social reform in reality, but they also showed concerns with future development of the country in both rural and urban settings. The fourth type was root-seeking literature (xungen wenxue), which emerged and dominated the Chinese literary scene around 1985. The term 'root' often refers to an idea of going back to Chinese literary traditions and remaining faithful to a pre-Maoist national cultural identity. Advocated by male writers A Cheng (b. 1949), Han Shaogong (b. 1953), Jia Pingwa (b. 1952)²⁴ and women writers Wang Anyi (b. 1954),²⁵ Zhang Kangkang (b. 1950),²⁶ and Zhang Xinxin (b. 1953), root-seeking literature represented the experience of a group of educated urban youth in the rural area and articulated an ambivalence towards the merits and demerits of Chinese traditional and modernist literature. All these four types of literature dominated the Chinese literary scene in the 1970s and '80s.

The year 1985 is considered a watershed in Chinese literary history after the Cultural Revolution. Before 1985, the role of writers was mainly to 'reflect on history and criticize reality', whereas the emergence of root-seeking literature awoke the consciousness of writers and artists who had assimilated western literary modernism, but at the same time remained invested in the ideology of 'reforming nationality' and respecting their own cultural traditions.²⁷ Root-seeking literature involved, for instance, describing women's bodies as 'erotic', representing either a 'primitive sensation suppressed by Maoist discourse' for years or 'decadent aesthetics resulting from rewriting history' (Liu Jianmei, 2003: 197). To a certain extent, root-seeking literature brought an exotic flavour to traditional Chinese literature and

²³ See <http://baike.baidu.com/view/701591.htm?func=retitle>, accessed on 10/12/2009.

²⁴ Jia Pingwa (b. 1958), born in Shanxi province, famous writer, published the autobiographical novel *I'm A Peasant* (Wo shi nongmin, 2006) and *The Bright Night* (Baiye, 1999). For further information of the books, see <http://book.sina.com.cn/people/jiapingao/>.

²⁵ Wang Anyi (b. 1954), born in Nanjing, then moved to Shanghai, President of Shanghai Writers' Association, Professor at Fudan University.

²⁶ Zhang Kangkang is also considered as a representative of scar literature. See <http://news.hexun.com/2008-12-23/112682617.html>, accessed on 13/10/2009.

²⁷ See http://www.360doc.com/content/060415/11/5633_98728.html, accessed on 29/09/2007.

'intermingled modern consciousness and national culture'. It is in this sense that root-seeking literature has been deemed an 'integration of western thoughts and traditional culture'.²⁸

In the mid-1990s, the market began to play a crucial role not only in the economy but also in cultural production. As a result of the development of the market economy, as well as the modernization of Chinese socialism, literature was redefined and reconstructed by market-driven demands and forces, rather than as previously, controlled by the state. A new interest in the 'image and presentation of the feminine', centred on 'physical appearance and adornment', attracted Chinese intellectuals (Croll, 1995: 150-2). Croll argues:

This is not surprising given that one of the most important characteristics distinguishing reform from revolution is the new interest in consumption, in consumer goods and in their style, colour, material and brand name, all of which ... generated a new phenomenon – consumer desire ... the new interest in commodities and lifestyles ... brought about a new relation between people and things, so that persons [became] classified not so much by their class background or 'work' or occupation as previously, as by the possession of objects or their evaluation... (1995: 151)

According to Croll, a choice of 'colour, style and fashion' outwardly revealed 'different qualities of the feminine', and thus generated 'a sense of the individual' (ibid).

Referring to consumerism, feminist critic Dai Jinhua (b. 1959)²⁹ termed this 'a new interest' and 'an emerging historical force' (Dai 1999). Dai goes on to argue that consumerism plays a dual role in contemporary China, as both 'a liberating and an objectifying force'.³⁰ First, it introduced a 'utilitarian, pragmatic, fluid view of society and identity' in sharp contrast with the political and moral ideology of the Maoist era

²⁸ See http://news.ifeng.com/special/gqkf30reading/list/200807/0714_4053_652495.shtml, accessed on 11/02/2009.

²⁹ Dai Jinhua (b. 1959), Professor in Comparative Literature at Beijing University. Her works include *As if in the Mirror: Interviews with Dai Jinhua* (Youzai jingzhong: Dai Jinhua fangtan lu, 1999) and *Invisible Writing: A Study of Chinese Culture in the 1990s* (Yinxing shuxie: Jiushi niandai zhongguo wenhua yanjiu, 1999).

³⁰ See also Wang Anyi (1991: 170).

(Wang Anyi, 1991: 169). The state and the Communist party loosened their control over economic, social and cultural arenas, as well as individual positions in society in the post-Mao era (1976-). It became possible to talk about personal desire, sexuality and the pursuit of individual freedom which were 'taboo subjects' under Mao's regime, but became 'the leading forces in constructing people's identities as modern, free consumer-citizens' (Wang Anyi, 1991: 169). Second, consumerism influenced not only cultural production, but also people's daily lives. It placed 'the world of the everyday into the world of the market' (ibid). It thus left little space for 'oppositional social reflections and critique', as well as values and ethics 'independent of the logic of consumption itself' (ibid: 170).

As Wang Jing observes, 'cultural capital and economic capital became mutually transformative' (2001: 85). The term 'cultural capital' was first articulated by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) to advocate his view of the importance of social origin over economic capital in the discussion of the relation between one's taste and one's social position. By the mid-1990s when China stepped into the market economy, the notion of culture as capital was much in circulation (Wang Jing, 2001: 85). Literature, as one form of cultural production, was fundamentally transformed from 'a mouthpiece of the political party', and a 'representation of the cultural elite's vision of history', into a diverse response to the 'changing demands of the cultural market' (Wang Anyi, 1991: 172). Famous writer and literary critic Wang Shuo³¹ announced that the purpose of his work was to let everyman (lao baixing) 'have fun in the form of a daydream' (Wang Shuo 1992). Thus from the 1990s onward, certain writers such as Wang Shuo sought to produce a daydream-like pleasure in their texts for their readers, now understood as consumers.

Self-Narration as a Type of Individualized Writing

One of the types of works that produced such pleasure were different forms of self-

³¹ Wang Shuo (b. 1958), born in Beijing, famous writer, started writing in 1978. His works include *It Seems Beautiful* (Kanshangqu henmei, 2000) and *A Disappearing Woman* (Xiaoshi de nüren, 1993).

narration. This is an important issue because some of the glam-writers' works that I shall focus on in this thesis – to be discussed below – fall into the category of self-narration or (auto/semi-auto)biographical fiction. Self-narration has a long tradition in China. The first recorded woman's self-narration was the preface to *Nüjie* ([Admonitions to Women], dates unknown), written by the first woman historian Ban Zhao (approx. 49-120) in the East Han dynasty,³² which was canonized as the guideline for women's conduct in Chinese feudal society. Besides the woman poet Li Qingzhao's (1084-1151) *Jinshilu houxu* ([A Catalogue of Bronze and Stone Inscriptions], 1134),³³ and male writer Shen Fu's (1763 – 1825) *Fusheng liuji* ([Six Records of a Floating Life], 1808),³⁴ full-length autobiographical writing did not emerge in China until the twentieth century. Modern Chinese women's autobiographical writing emerged in late Imperial times and flourished after the May Fourth movement in 1919. It disappeared after the foundation of New China (PRC) in 1949, and did not resurface again until the 1980s (Wang Linzhen, 2004: 23).

In discussing Chinese women's autobiographical practices in the early 1980s, Wang Lingzhen states that 'the existence of diverse personal voices of Chinese women writers, which departed from the state-defined vision of reality' has been neglected in discussions of early 1980s literature (2004: 160). Branded as bourgeois individualism, individual voices were prohibited and suppressed as politically improper from the 1950s onwards. Under the Chinese political and culturally specific context of the time, self-oriented writing was closely associated with women writers such as Zhang Jie (b. 1937) and Yu Luojin (b. 1946) who were *accused* of publishing 'autobiographically oriented writings' (Liu H., 1987: 27-30; Zhang Qing, 1986: 36-41).

Such 'autobiographically oriented writing' was considered 'bourgeois' under Mao.

³² The date of the book is unknown, but the book is widely considered to have been written by Ban Zhao when she was in her seventies. See http://baike.baidu.com/lemma.php/dispose/history_version.php?id=237114, accessed on 24/07/2007.

³³ See <http://hi.baidu.com/xiezewei/blog/item/a057a57785f7c41bb151b9a5.html>, accessed on 24/07/2007.

³⁴ I am using the 1983 edition, English version of the book *Six Records of a Floating Life* in this thesis.

'The bourgeois' was a term of defamation in radical Communist discourse. It initially referred to an opposite class to the proletariat under Mao's regime, and was condemned for having 'irreconcilable conflicts' with the proletariat.³⁵ In the post-Mao era, particularly in the 1990s, the notion of 'bourgeois', or 'petty bourgeois' (xiaozi), often refers to young people who live in urban cities and aspire to a western way of thinking and living, pursuing material and spiritual pleasure. Today bourgeois is closely related to a certain kind of taste and lifestyle in China, as I shall discuss it in more detail in the following chapters in relation to the glam-writers' works.

When such writing became acceptable in the early 1980s, Zhang Jie was the first woman to engage in literary representation of women's personal experience, feelings, and pursuit of ideals. One of her best-known novels, *Ai shi buneng wangjide* ([Love Should Not Be Forgotten], 1979) declared her distance from the political concerns of the time. The novel implied 'a separation of love from dominant social and conventional ideologies' by depicting a mother's lifetime pursuit of her personal ideal of love (Wang Linzhen, 2004: 162). Zhang Jie's *Love Should Not Be Forgotten* has been considered 'one of the first endeavors in the post-Mao era to carve out a personal space that is shared first and foremost by a mother and her daughter' (ibid: 164). Other women writers such as Zhang Xinxin and Zhang Kangkang, who practiced self-oriented writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, also challenged the role of literature, which had previously been 'defined exclusively by political and collective ideology and values' (Wang Linzhen, 2004: 161). This provided Chinese women, especially intellectuals of the younger generations, with 'a public and narrative channel' to reflect 'their gendered and subjective experiences' (ibid: 163). Wang Anyi expressed her feelings about her own personal mode of writing thus: 'I suddenly found that if I wrote down what had been collected in my heart and from my life, this could be short stories, too!' (1991: 3)

By the end of the 1990s, a new form of self-narration, koushu shilu (the written

³⁵ See http://baike.baidu.com/view/29095.htm?fr=ala0_1, accessed on 12/05/2010.

recording of actual oral narration) had become a popular literary genre in mainland China (Teng Wei, 2000: 292-324). An Dun (dates unknown) was the first woman journalist who began to interview people about qinggan yinmi (private affairs and emotions) in China in 1997.³⁶ Teng Wei observes that both the genre koushu shilu and the phrase yinsi re (privacy fever) referred to the phenomenon in literature of 'revelation, exposure, and the expression of emotions' (Wang Linzhen, 2004: 176). Chen Ran (b. 1962) and Lin Bai (b. 1958), two of the most representative figures of women's autobiographical practice from the 1990s,³⁷ illustrate in their works the reconfigurations of the 'private self' and 'the growing mass production and consumption of self narratives' (Wang Linzhen, 2004: 175). Chen Ran's *Siren shenghuo* ([A Private Life], 1996) and Lin Bai's *Yigeren de zhanzheng* ([A Self at War], 1994) signalled a 'conscious appropriation of the existing discourse on women, privacy, and consumption' through the writers' choices to refer to private life either in the title of the book itself, and/or in the discussion of women, morality and private life in the texts (Wang Linzhen, 2004: 176). These two writers' autobiographical works were regarded as both 'a product of consumer culture' and 'a subjective negotiation and appropriation of consumerism' (ibid: 178). This engagement with consumer culture, and a preoccupation with private life and self-identity, has been continually present in women's autobiographical writing from the late 1990s.

The Rise of the 'Beauty Writers', and the Context of the Post-70s Glam-Writers' Works

For more than a quarter of a century from 1949, Chinese mainstream culture focused on revolutionary literature produced in the rural revolutionary bases, serving as a reflection of the political and social reality of the time. A unified grand narrative and collective form of expression dominated elite intellectuals' thinking and literary production. Among others, it was the urban literature (*dushi wenxue*) and new form of individualized writing (*gerenhua xiezu*) initiated by avant-garde women writers

³⁶ See <http://bjyouth.y.net.com/article.jsp?oid=2429795&pageno=1>, accessed on 27/06/2007.

³⁷ Women writers such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai were known for their avant-garde and experimental way of writing, known as 'individualized writing' (*gerenhua xiezu*) in the 1990s.

(xianfeng pai) such as Chen Ran, Lin Bai, and Hai Nan (b. 1962) from the 1990s that subverted and impinged on this traditional grand narrative and ideology by breaking with male-centred literary tradition and deviating from the grand narrative and conventional male construction of female identity. To a certain extent, the writing of the avant-garde women writers was influenced by, and corresponded to, the western notion of 'consciousness raising' (CR) novels 'linked to the practices of Second Wave feminism' (Whelehan, 2005: 8), although modern feminism in China developed in a way completely differently from in the west. In the accelerated process of China's modernization and globalization, under the banner of western literary theories such as poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and feminism, a younger generation of women writers who were born in the 1970s (known as '70 hou', the post-70s) emerged on the literary scene. These writers were strongly invested in exploring urban life and female experiences, and I shall briefly comment on the urban dimension first.

The post-70s writers are not the first generation who contributed to the revival of urban literature. Initiated by Beijing-writer Wang Shuo, a new urban narrative such as his novel *Half Flame, Half Brine* (Yiban shi huoyan, yiban shi haishui, 1989) describes idle urban youth who do not work but live a self-centred lifestyle in the metropolis. Contemporary Shanghai-based women writers such as Chen Danyan (b. 1958), Pan Xiangli (b. 1966), and Wang Anyi also write about their urban experiences and provide readers with impressions of the new Shanghai of the 1990s. More and more women writers have embarked on writing about that city from different angles including in a retrospective way. The narrative of Shanghai has thus in part been turned into a women's narrative,³⁸ which provides a cultural basis and platform for the post-70s glam-writers who want to write in a different way (I shall discuss urban literature as a category of the post-70s writing in Chapter 4).

This has to be seen in a context where after the PRC was founded in 1949, urban

³⁸ See <http://www.cul-studies.com/Article/essay/200511/3030.html>, accessed on 11/11/2008.

literature was rejected by mainstream revolutionary and folk literature for being 'decadent and bourgeois' (Lu, 2008: 176), and condemned as 'carrion and degenerated capitalist literature or colonial literature' and 'the flower of evil'³⁹ (Dai Jinhua, 1996: 60). Such resistance to urban literature contributed to the notion of Shanghai as 'a city of decadence and sin' by the Communist party who seized power from the rural bases (Lu, 2008: 174). Not until the 1990s when the government invested in and expanded the city, was Shanghai transformed into a new economic and commercial metropolis. Urban literature was then rescued from the exclusion from mainstream literature and again appeared in the public eye.

In explaining why writers born in the 1970s made 'a world of difference' in the literary field, writer Shi Kang (b. 1968) notes:

They grew up in a period of radical changes. When they were young, they experienced a period when there was a scarcity of things to choose from and when commodities were rationed. But as they grew older they found themselves surrounded by an explosion of wealth and commodities. Things seem to have changed overnight and still seem to be changing.⁴⁰

This appropriately delineates the social and economic context in which writers born in the 1970s lived and grew up. This generation experienced the transformation from a state-planned economy to a market economy and the reshaping of ideas about selfhood during their adolescence. Whilst being given the opportunity to receive a better education in a materially improved society, they also internalized notions such as the worship of money, the importance of material values, the pursuit of fashion, resistance to sex oppression, the emphasis on individualization, and faith in personal feelings, etc. Having grown up without the imperatives of mutual assistance (*huxiang bangzhu*) and the edification of collectivism which was cherished in the Maoist era, and driven by the rapid development of commercialization and fast accumulation of

³⁹ The phrase 'flower of evil' was borrowed from French writer Baudelaire's poem *Les fleurs du mal* and used to describe the modernist genre and decadent urban literature in pre-1949 China.

⁴⁰ See http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-10/20/content_384079.htm, accessed on 1/9/2007.

wealth, the post-70s generation learnt to focus on themselves and their own concerns. This weakening of social responsibility and political belief formed a deep gap in the discourse between this generation and the older generations. The education the post-70s generation received was in a sense inadequate to their swiftly changing social reality. As a result, one might argue that they believed in the immediacy of what they saw and felt rather than what they had been told, preferring to rely on their own understandings and experiences of life. By communicating and identifying with their peers, they tried to cast off the panic of being isolated in society. Without having experienced the collectivism and deprivations which their parent generation had in the Maoist era, they were not concerned with other people's judgement in the ways previous generations had been (Zong Renfa et al 1998). Instead, they tended to alienate themselves from mainstream society by living a marginalized way of life, such as indulging in going to pubs, sex, and drugs.

It is in this light that a certain group of women writers has been labeled in terms of the decade in which they were born, i.e. the post-70s generation. They have also been labelled 'beauty writers' (meinü zuojia), 'alternative writers' (linglei zuojia), 'fashionable women writers' (shishang nüzuojia), and the 'new new generation' (xinxin renlei). They are a group of young women, who became an influential writing community in the Chinese literary field in the late 1990s. This writing group consists of and is represented by figures such as Ann Baby (b. 1974), Mian Mian (b. 1970), Wei Hui (b. 1973), Wei Wei (b. 1970), Yin Lichuan (b. 1973), Zhao Bo (b. 1971), Zhou Jieru (b. 1976), and Zhu Wenying (b. 1970). Hong Ying (b. 1962) is an exception among these glam-writers in terms of her age. Nonetheless she has been considered a member of the beauty writers, by virtue of the similarities she shares with the post-70s writers with regard to the way she presents herself to the public and certain common themes in their works. For instance, they all give expression to their rebellion against authority, their distance from society, and their frustration in love relationships. Their concerns with lifestyles are, as I shall discuss in Chapter 6, reflected on these glam-writers' personal blogs.

Outlining the Five Glam-Writers' Works and Their Reception in Mainland China

The five glam-writers whose works and reception I deal with in this thesis, were selected on the basis of the extent to which their works have attracted and received attention from readers, critics, and the media. Ann Baby began to publish her novels on the internet in 1998, where she became very popular. Her works are most familiar to Chinese readers aged under thirty (by 2007) who came in touch with internet literature when they were in secondary school. Thus she has the first and most stable readership on the internet among the glam-writers I discuss. Zhao Bo's writing is less influential, but has repeatedly been acknowledged the product of a 'beauty writer'.⁴¹ My interest in Zhao Bo started not only because she was born in the same city as I, but also because of her effort in promoting her career apart from her works, e.g. discussing her private life on her blog to attract more hits, and the extent to which her works have been received and evaluated.

So what do post-70s glam-writers' works exactly refer to? What characteristics do these writings possess that qualify them as so-called 'body writing' (shenti xiezu) or 'desire writing' (yuwanghua xiezu)? What differentiates each writer's work from the others'? In the following section I shall outline the five glam-writers' representative works in terms of the themes, genre, characters, setting, plots and style of writing. As the works of Hong Ying, Mian Mian and Wei Hui are more familiar to western readers and professionals (novels such as *Shanghai Baby* have been studied in university curricula and the English versions of novels such as *Candy* by Mian Mian and *Daughter of the River* by Hong Ying are sometimes available in libraries), I shall give only a brief introduction to these novels, and then discuss in fuller detail the other two less well-known women writers' works (to the western audience), namely Ann Baby's and Zhao Bo's.

As to their main themes, the post-70s glam-writers tend to focus on the personal

⁴¹ See <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/RS/250070.htm>, accessed on 2/2/2009.

encounters, experiences and desires of a particular group of urban youth, who are perceived to live on the fringes of an industrialized metropolis. As I discussed above, a generation who grew up in a rapidly changing society with abundant material wealth has had to confront how it relates to this environment. The post-70s narratives entail a great deal of depiction of everyday private life and sexual scenes, focusing on an exploration of bodily desire and material pleasure. Drug abuse, alcohol, going to pubs, underground rock-'n'-roll music, and sex constitute the core pleasures depicted in the post-70s writings. A sense of alternativeness, or 'otherness' (linglei), is expressed through an engagement with social taboos such as sexual promiscuity, drug taking, masturbation and prostitution. This distinguishes the post-70s writers from any other writing groups or schools in mainland China.

Most of the post-70s narratives are produced in the form of an autobiography or semi-autobiography, using the first person to narrate personal experiences or the third person while reflecting upon the narrator's experiences. The characters in these novels have many similarities with the actual authors' lives and are portrayed as young, modern, and independent women who live in a city such as Shanghai, aspiring to material pleasures such as fashion and a so-called bourgeois way of life. Almost all the heroines in these novels like fine clothes, expensive perfume, rock 'n' roll music, cigarettes, and going to parties and pubs. They also share certain common characteristics such as rebellion against authority, decadence and remoteness from mainstream society, a focus on desire, and despair in love and relationships.

Among the post-70s glam-writers, Mian Mian and Wei Hui are considered to be spokeswomen of the so-called beauty writers' camp. *Tang* (Candy, 2000) by Mian Mian and *Shanghai Baby* by Wei Hui attracted both domestic and international attention immediately after they were published. In *Shanghai Baby*, Wei Hui depicts a love triangle between Coco, a twenty-five-year-old waitress in a Shanghai café, Tian Tian, a talented but sexually impotent young artist, who becomes Coco's Chinese

boyfriend and is a drug addict, and Mark, a married German business man living in Shanghai who becomes Coco's sexual partner. The novel was judged by the state as a model of 'decadence, corruption, and contaminated by western culture' for its explicit depiction of 'female masturbation, homosexuality, and drug use'.⁴² It was considered to have a severely negative influence on Chinese youth. The book was banned and publicly burned in Beijing in 2000, and was prohibited from being sold anywhere in mainland China. While Wei Hui claimed herself as 'China's first banned pornographic female novelist',⁴³ in front of the media she expressed her confusion about why this novel should be banned.⁴⁴ It has to be said in this context that by western standards the novel is rather tame; the sex scenes are quite modest with little direct reference to any genital body part; and there is little by way of decadence in western terms. But for a Chinese context, the text was very revealing.

Candy suffered a similar fate to *Shanghai Baby*. In this autobiographical novel, Mian Mian tells the story of a girl, Hong, who changes from being a wandering prostitute and drug addict to becoming a well-known writer. In April 2000, *Candy* was officially banned by the Chinese government for its over-explicit description of sex, suicide, drug abuse, and the mention of Aids in particular, followed by a ban of the rest of Mian Mian's works.⁴⁵ However, domestic prohibition and the controversies over these books helped to earn their author fame both inside and outside of China, and boosted their underground distributions and book sales abroad. Hundreds of thousands of pirated copies were circulated through street newspaper booths, magazine stalls, and private bookstores.⁴⁶ Online versions of both writers' novels have been available and popular among the younger generation under the age of thirty.⁴⁷

⁴² See <http://edu.sina.com.cn/wander/2000-05-19/2988.shtml>, accessed on 29/08/2007.

⁴³ See <http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/youngchina/a.hottest.authors.html>, accessed on 26/07/2007.

⁴⁴ See <http://news.beelink.com.cn/20000724/395626.shtml>, accessed on 20/9/2008.

⁴⁵ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4326235.stm>, and <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/FD29Ad01.html>, accessed on 12/11/2008.

⁴⁶ See http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-03/01/content_420714.htm, accessed on 29/08/2007.

⁴⁷ See http://www.modernsky.com/bands/mianmian/mm_file.htm, accessed on 29/08/2007.

The novels created a notorious battle between the two authors in April 2000. This battle received attention from both literary circles and the media. Mian Mian accused Wei Hui of plagiarizing her novel *La La La* (1997) which was published in Hong Kong two years earlier than *Shanghai Baby*.⁴⁸ This caused a severe dispute on the internet among fans of both writers and ended up with an increase in the sales of both writers' novels, *Shanghai Baby* and *Candy*. Writer and critic Chen Cun (b. 1954)⁴⁹ expressed his view of the book battle, emphasizing a difference in attitudes between the two writers:

It is sometimes inevitable [for works] to overlap in content, as some codes in the post-70s writers' works have become labels for alternativeness, dandyism, westernization, and vogue. However, [writers'] attitudes need to be distinguished. For instance, Mian Mian's attitude towards heroin in her novels is downright negative by saying straightforwardly that heroin is absolute rubbish, whereas Wei Hui justifies its use.⁵⁰ (my translation)

In comparing both writers' novels, literary scholars such as Chen Sihe (b. 1954)⁵¹ and Cheng Yongxin affirmed a truthfulness and authenticity of personal experience in Mian Mian's texts, while seeing Wei Hui's texts as more of the imagination with little of her actual experience involved.⁵² However, I have observed that during her career, Wei Hui's approach to her writing has undergone a fundamental change from rebelling against common customs (in works such as 'Ai Xia' and 'Shuizhong de chunü')⁵³ to embracing patriarchal conventions (as in *Shanghai Baby* and *Marrying the Buddha*), from intentionally seeking personal liberation and overturning male-centred discourses to indulging in sensory desires and catering to the 'male gaze' and the taste of mass consumption in commodity society.

⁴⁸ See <http://www.iht.com/articles/2000/06/20/melvin.t.php>, accessed on 12/12/2008.

⁴⁹ Chen Cun (b. 1954), born in Shanghai, Vice-President of Shanghai Writers' Association. His works include *Jinye de gudu* (The Loneliness of Tonight, 1992) and *Gudian de ren* (The Classical Person, 1996).

⁵⁰ See <http://edu.sina.com.cn/critique/2000-04-14/1806.shtml>, accessed on 21/12/2008.

⁵¹ Chen Sihe (b. 1954), born in Shanghai, Professor in Comparative Literature at Fudan University, Chief Editor of the journal *Shanghai Literature*.

⁵² See <http://news.blcu.edu.cn/xbwx/main/ArticleShow.asp?ArtID=389>, accessed on 07/02/2008.

⁵³ See *Wei Hui zuopin quanji* (Collection of Wei Hui's Works, 2000).

If the success of Mian Mian and Wei Hui may be attributed to their high profiles and their media impact rather than their works, Ann Baby is quite different among the post-70s writers in terms of her low-key personality, style of writing and points of view. Ann Baby too produces narratives depicting the experiences and feelings of marginalized and isolated urban youth in a highly industrialized society. Different from the characters in Mian Mian's and Wei Hui's novels who appear as 'bad girls'⁵⁴ and eagerly pursue sensory desires and ephemeral pleasures, the heroines in Ann Baby's novels depart and intentionally distance themselves from love relationships, searching instead for self-identity. Their external appearance is uniformly portrayed as having long dark hair, big eyes, blank and pale faces, thin and tall figures. The heroines usually have two kinds of outfits: a white cotton dress in the summer, and a black sweater and old jeans in winter. This depiction of female figures differentiates Ann Baby's characters from those of other post-70s writers such as Mian Mian and Wei Hui. The fashion aesthetics created by Ann Baby in her novels was liked and adopted among her young readers as soon as her first collection of short stories *Goodbye Vivian* was published in 2000.

Following the success of *Goodbye Vivian*, Ann Baby published her prose and short story collection *Unending August* (Bayue weiyang) and first novel *Flower on the Other Shore* (Bi'an hua) in 2001, and the photography and prose collection *Rosebush Island* (Qiangwei daoyu) in the following year. Then she finished her second novel *Two or Three Things* (Er san shi), a second photography collection *Note of Consciousness* (Qingxing ji) in 2004, and her third novel *The Lotus* (Lianhua) in 2006. Her latest and last novel to date was *The Plain Year Bright Time* (Sunian jinshi), published after she gave birth to her baby in October 2007. Along with two reprinted versions of *Rosebush Island* and *Unending August* in 2005, all of her ten published books have been in the top ten bestsellers on the chart of the domestic

⁵⁴ See <http://www.bibliofemme.com/interviews/weihui.shtml>, and <http://www.yellowbridge.com/literature/modernfiction2000.php>, accessed on 12/02/2008.

bookstore sale system.⁵⁵ In reviewing the success of her publications, Ann Baby has a clear sense of her readerships:

My readership consists of a number of university students, and a greater part of the metropolis population who have higher education and stable jobs or engage in art production, such as editors from publishing houses, newspapers and magazines, personnel in advertising and IT companies, white-collar workers in various industries... There may be some readers from other social strata. I think my mature readers may be those who are sensitive and embrace separateness.⁵⁶ (my translation)

Among Ann Baby's readers, there are two different and oppositional camps. One consists of loyal readers who acknowledge the literary and aesthetic values of the writer's works. The other is made up of readers who are against her way of writing and see Ann Baby's works as filled with notions such as the 'bourgeois, decadence, narcissism, and falsehood',⁵⁷ condemning her fictional bourgeois lifestyle as a bad role model for the younger generation. One of the goals of this thesis is to examine actual readers' views and opinions of the glam-writers' novels and reflect upon individual differences in the reception of these works.

Despite a tendency of depicting a certain way of life in the metropolis, Ann Baby's novels are mainly based on her past experiences and conducted in a self-exploratory manner. In *The Lotus* (2006), for instance, Ann Baby tells the story of three young people from different backgrounds who go on a journey to Motuo, a sacred land where the lotus is said to bloom. The three characters are Qingzhao, a woman who suffers from a serious disease and expects her death in Motuo; Shansheng, a middle-aged man who quits the hustle and bustle of the city; Neihe, his old friend whom he is going to visit, a girl who has encountered many mishaps in life and lives

⁵⁵ For information on Ann Baby's books, see <http://annie.tkwin.com/>, and <http://book.sina.com.cn/people/annibaobei/index.shtml>, accessed on 21/12/2008.

⁵⁶ See <http://www.ewen.cc/books/bkview.asp?bkid=81254&cid=199828>, accessed on 12/1/2009.

⁵⁷ See <http://union.5460.net/school/bbs/displnfo1.jsp?id=716173>, accessed on 10/12/2008.

in Motuo. The novel is an exploration of a generation's sense of ambivalence, articulated through the conversation between the three characters during their journey to Motuo. The language Ann Baby uses is fragmented and randomly organized. The structure of the novel follows a chronological order but there is no linear plot development, with marginalized individuals remaining in a particular state rather than developing. Sentences such as 'everyone should write a will in advance, as humans will die at any moment'; 'people living in the city for long may become dependent city animals, demanding abundant functions provided by city to construct their lives'; and 'I do not believe love relationship exists in this city' (Ann Baby 2006), are indicative of the views expressed in the novel.

The novel was written after the author's journey to Tibet in 2004, where she had walked across Brahmaputra. Although it appears to be coloured by the author's own feelings and experience, Ann Baby has denied on many occasions that the novel is an autobiography. Instead she has described it as a fictionalized story based on her own experience and inspired by 'sources such as a report, a rumour, or a memory', and the three main characters as 'three different layers of one's inner world which embodies struggle and disruption'.⁵⁸ In response to the critic Gao Yuanbao's (b. 1966) review of her novel which suggested that this text had a rather different style of writing compared to her previous works, Ann Baby agreed with Gao on her intentionally different way of constructing and developing the storyline:

The stories in my works are mostly disjointed in time, or hardly in close relation to it, characterized by isolation and illusion. That is why it is difficult for critics to find a coordinate to refer to my works. But the writing which I identify with, is the one slightly distanced from the present. A certain sort of disjointedness and isolation can make a writer's self-reflection and observation more independent.⁵⁹
(my translation)

⁵⁸ See http://news.xinhuanet.com/book/2006-02/21/content_4207000.htm, accessed on 2/1/2009.

⁵⁹ See http://news.xinhuanet.com/book/2006-02/21/content_4207000.htm, accessed on 2/1/2009.

An analogy has been suggested between the two post-70s glam-writers Ann Baby and Wei Hui based on the coincidence of the word 'baby' being used in the former's pen name and one of the latter's book titles. It has also been suggested that the success of Ann Baby's works partly derives from the popularity of Wei Hui's novel *Shanghai Baby*. This was strongly disputed among fans of both writers and refuted by Ann Baby's fans on the internet. Apart from different attitudes towards the media and the different images that the two writers have, there are obvious differences between their works. For instance, Ann Baby writes about hope and a constant search for meaning, while Wei Hui writes about indulgence and despair of the future and life. The former focuses on the characters' spiritual world, exploring the nature of love and relationships, whereas the latter's works are centred on the material world and bodily desire. The former tells her stories from a distance as if the author is a witness, whilst the latter creates an intradiegetic position for her narrator.

As mentioned earlier, Zhao Bo and her works are the least influential among the five glam-writers in my study. Her novels are characterised by a simple plot and plain language which differentiates her works from those of the other post-70s glam-writers such as Wei Hui who specializes in producing sensational narratives with exaggerated and vernacular language. In most of her earlier short stories, Zhao Bo dealt with ordinary daily life as in 'This Life of Mr. He' (Hexiansheng de jinsheng jinshi, 1996), and relationships between an older man and a young woman as in 'Traceless Years' (Suiyue wuhen) and 'Love in Shanghai' (Shanghai de qing yu ai).⁶⁰ Many of her works have been well received by established critics and writers such as Wang Anyi, Wang Shuo, Shi Kang, Han Dong, Wang Gan, and Wei Xinhong.⁶¹ Not only has Chen Cun praised Zhao Bo's work as 'a fortune for literature', he also considers Zhao Bo's short stories such as 'Traceless Years' 'easily and calmly told', and like 'tea in an old pot'.⁶² This, in a Chinese context, is a compliment.

⁶⁰ See Zhao Bo's collection of short stories *Kouxiangtang shenghuo* ([Life as Chewing Gums], 2002).

⁶¹ See <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=163492397>, and <http://edu.sina.com.cn/literature/vogue/4/804.html>, accessed on 23/12/2008.

⁶² See <http://edu.sina.com.cn/literature/celebrity/vogue/4/802.html>, accessed on 3/12/2008.

There has been a change in the theme and style of writing in Zhao Bo's recent works in that she has located the action in Europe rather than in China. While works such as the short story 'This Life of Mr. He' were about everyday life in China, written in the third person, her more recent novel *The Dew on the Road* (Lushang de lu, 2003), written in the first person and in the form of prose, tells the story of a young Chinese woman's experience during her stay in Europe. Although the heroine has a French male host who accompanies her on her journey, the heroine remains infatuated with a mysterious Chinese man whose identity is unknown to the readers. The novel is regarded as one of the best novels by Zhao Bo as it supposedly delineates 'the very reality of the Chinese New Woman's conscious choice of life'.⁶³

One of the important issues in relation to the beauty writers, is that their personal traits and lives have come under public scrutiny as a function of the kinds of quasi-autobiographical narratives they produce. Thus, Zhao Bo's physical appearance has been discussed within and outside of literary circles, especially praised by writers such as Chen Cun and Mian Mian. But her socializing with celebrities has been subject to critique.⁶⁴ The rumours about her private life, regarding her relationship with Zhang Zhaoyang (the CEO of Sohu, one of the China's biggest web companies), which was thought to be hinted at in her novel *The Dew on the Road*,⁶⁵ caused waves in both literary and IT fields. Her intimate connections with famous male writers such as Hai Yan (b. 1954) and Wang Shuo which she disclosed in *Beijing Water* (Beijing liushui, 2005), were decried for intruding upon the privacy of these men. Subtitled *A Diary of a Woman Writer's Private Life*,⁶⁶ *Beijing Water* records Zhao Bo's five-year life experience since her move from Shanghai to Beijing. The publication of this novel had some negative effects on the author. For example, in naming the book *Beijing Water* Zhao Bo admitted that she had cited the writer Sun

⁶³ See <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/20031211/2235557791.shtml>, accessed on 12/12/2008.

⁶⁴ See <http://culture.cnhubei.com/2006-04/04/cms67433article.shtml>, accessed on 12/12/2008.

⁶⁵ See <http://read.anhuinews.com/system/2004/02/18/000566872.shtml>, accessed on 12/11/2008.

⁶⁶ See <http://enjoy.eastday.com/eastday/enjoy/node58771/node58833/node116809/userobject1ai1840392.html>, accessed on 12/12/2008.

Ganlu's column title *Shanghai Water*.⁶⁷ In 2006 she attempted suicide due to the intense pressures she felt when she had poor reviews from her readers on the internet after *Beijing Water* was published.⁶⁸

Mian Mian, Wei Hui and Hong Ying (b. 1962) have had their works translated into foreign languages. Hong Ying's works, unlike the others', have been classified as avant-garde women's literature,⁶⁹ and discussed in relation to 'body narratives' (shenti/quti xushi) produced by women writers such as Chen Ran, Lin Bai, and Hai Nan, who attracted literary attention in the early 1990s and were regarded as the leading figures of 'individualized writing' and the female 'private novel' (si xiaoshuo) (Wang Ning, 2002: 204-5).⁷⁰ Although they share certain traits in their writings in terms of reflections upon women's self-consciousness and the exploration of female body, Hong Ying has more often fallen into the category of 'beauty writers', in part because she has created a fashionable image of herself and her lifestyle in public,⁷¹ which distances her from those who were born in the 1960s and assimilates her to the post-70s generation.

Hong Ying's writing is somewhat different from the post-70s writers' with regard to their content and style. Whereas the post-70s focus in their texts on experiences such as sex and drugs, ignoring the historical context in which their stories take place, Hong Ying shows more concern for political and social issues in her writing, relating individuals to the history of the nation and setting stories in particular backgrounds at particular historical times.⁷² Almost all of her novels focus on how individuals' fate is

⁶⁷ See <http://book.sina.com.cn/news/c/2005-11-01/1005191870.shtml>, accessed on 12/10/2008.

⁶⁸ See <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2006-02-08/09218151485s.shtml>, accessed on 11/12/2008.

⁶⁹ The term women's literature (nüxing wenxue) has been controversial among literary professionals in China. As to the definition and nature of women's literature, at least three definitions coexist: literature written by women, literature written about women, and literature written for women. The definition of women's literature itself implies a dual meaning in translation: one is women's writing, and the other is feminist writing. Chinese literary critics tend to categorize the narratives of Chen Ran, Lin Bai, and Hai Nan as feminist narratives and individualized writing in particular.

⁷⁰ Also available at

<http://docserver.ingentaconnect.com/deliver/connect/rodopi/0923411x/v18n1/s17.pdf?expires=1235663243&id=49063574&titleid=959&accname=Guest+User&checksum=D0AB2206FCC93C3D4C2E15072A4815A4>, accessed on 10/10/2008.

⁷¹ See <http://eladies.sina.com.cn/qg/2006/0720/1439272128.html>, accessed on 1/12/2008.

⁷² See <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/RS/476117.htm>, accessed on 12/01/2009.

closely related to and determined by the historical context in which they grow up and live. Based on her own experience as a teenager living in a poor family with seven children in Chongqing, Hong Ying's autobiographical novel *Daughter of the River* (Ji'e de nü'er, 2000) is the life narrative of the illegitimate daughter Liu Liu, born in 1962, the year of the Great Famine,⁷³ who suffers from the dual starvation of food and love. Due to extreme hunger and a dearth of love in the family, the protagonist even tolerates rape by her history teacher. Hong Ying's controversial novel *K* (Yingguo qingren, 2003) is the story of Julian Bell's⁷⁴ love affair with Chinese writer Ling Shuhua, named *K* for number eleven in the novel, during his visit to China in the 1930s when the Second Sino-Japanese War took place. Ling's daughter sued the author for 'defamation of the dead'. This court case against Hong Ying caused the book to be banned in mainland China.⁷⁵ The novel was rewritten and published under the title *The English Lover* in 2003.

Having grown up on her own without any protection and care from her family, Hong Ying said in an interview with the *China Reading Newspaper*: 'I have to be much stronger than boys to face lots of difficulties and problems in my life. I have never regarded myself as a woman. I never expected such privilege.'⁷⁶ She sees herself strongly defined by her life circumstances and defines herself as a 'pre-theory, fate-determined, and action-oriented feminist'.⁷⁷ In *The Lord of Shanghai* (Shanghai wang, 2003), Hong Ying portrays a courageous female character Xiao Yuegui who conquers Shanghai which used to be under men's absolute power. Hong Ying migrated to the UK in 1990 and has continued to write in Chinese. Her works have received both domestic and international recognition.

⁷³ See <http://www.marionboyars.co.uk/AUTHORS/Hong%20Ying.html>, accessed on 11/11/2008.

⁷⁴ Julian Bell (1908-1937) was an English poet and the son of Clive and Vanessa Bell, the elder sister of Virginia Woolf. He went to teach English at Wuhan University in China in 1935, where he had a relationship with a married Chinese woman *K* described in his letters. He was killed in the battle at Brunete when he took part in the Spanish Civil War in 1937. Hong Ying produced a fictionalised account of this affair.

⁷⁵ See http://www.bj.xinhuanet.com/bjpd_wenyu/2003-08/06/content_787433.htm, accessed on 12/11/2008.

⁷⁶ See <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/RS/476117.htm>, accessed on 12/12/2008.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

As already stated, from Mian Mian and Wei Hui to Ann Baby and Zhao Bo, the post-70s writers are inclined to set stories in modern urban cities such as Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou where fashion, consumption, desire, and globalization all meet. Except for Mian Mian who is a Shanghai-born writer and later went to make a living in the south, the other three writers come from different cities in southern China and chose to settle in Shanghai. The city has become an important setting for these writers' works. As Sheldon Lu observes:

These partly autobiographical novels have set the trend for a new type of women's writing, unprecedented in Chinese literary history, which flaunts female sexuality in the construction of subjectivity. Moreover, the phenomenon of beauty writers is symptomatic of some more profound changes in Chinese literature, culture and society. This type of literary work signals the re-emergence of urban literature based in cosmopolitan Shanghai, the shift from national literature to globalization... (2008: 169)

This leads to a concern with the relation between the rise of urban literature and youth subculture produced by the post-70s writers, which I shall discuss in Chapter 4 where I explore the Chinese literary critics' reception of these glam-writers' works. It also results in debates about the relationship between elite culture and popular culture. Wang Ning argues that:

Commercialization puts at risk the unique quality of elite literature. Popular literature devoted to so-called *petites histories*, media literature, Internet literature, TV series and films, reportage, and journalism have entered an age of pluralism...since the 1990s popular literature and culture have largely superseded serious literature and elite culture in the marketplace (2008: 7).

In reviewing modern Chinese literature, Wang Ning elucidates the importance of western literature for Chinese literature and its influence on Chinese writers: 'many modern Chinese writers were more strongly influenced or inspired by foreign writers than by their own literary tradition' (ibid: 4). In the post-70s narratives, an admiring attitude towards what is considered to be a western lifestyle has resulted in certain relatively popular modes of writing. Although the latter are not celebrated by Chinese

mainstream literary critics and scholars, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter 4, the former has been a trendy way of living among urban middle-class Chinese women since the 1990s onwards.

Many of the beauty writers have been strongly influenced by the 'beat generation' emerging in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁷⁸ Glam-writers such as Mian Mian and Wei Hui worshipped figures such as Allen Ginsberg, Henry Miller, and Bob Dylan by imitating the Beats' attitudes and lifestyles in their texts. Thus Wei Hui's work has been deemed as based on:

materialist consumption, uncontrolled emotions, constant belief in the impulse of one's heart, to submit to the deep burning of one's spirit, to give in to craziness, to prostrate oneself to every desire, to entertain all kinds of life's elation with greatest passion, including the mysteries of orgasm ...' (from *Crazy as Wei Hui*, in Ferry, 2003: 658).

This reflects Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*: 'the release of instinct lust, the overthrow of external oppressions on consciousness, and the peeling off of orthodox ethics coated on them' (Ginsberg, 1959: 3-27). It is indicative of the great break from traditional Chinese literature which the glam-writers' works constitute.

Not only has these women writers' attitude been influenced by western intellectuals, but so has their way of expression, form and style of writing. This is evident in Wei Hui's depiction of Shanghai as a city appearing rather like New York in *Shanghai Baby*:

Standing on the roof, we looked at the silhouettes of the buildings lit up by the street lights on both sides of the Huangpu River, especially the Oriental Pearl TV Tower, Asia's tallest. Its long, long steel column pierces the sky, proof of the city's phallus worship. The ferries, the waves, the night-dark grass, the dazzling neon lights and incredible structures – all these signs of material prosperity are aphrodisiacs the city uses to intoxicate itself. They have nothing to do with us,

⁷⁸ See <http://www.litkicks.com/BeatPages/page.jsp?what=BeatGen>, accessed on 26/07/2007.

the people who live among them. (Wei Hui, 2001: 16).

Here the city becomes an enticing material structure, far removed from the celebration of the rural that figured so strongly in Maoist writings. Intoxication with the city is matched by an intoxication with the body.

Different from the previous generations who produced a literature not focused on gender and which effaced the female body, the post-70s writers construct female subjectivity through an - by Chinese standards - excessive exposure of the female body, or 'hypervisibility' (Yang, 1999: 50). Such hypervisibility extends to the authors' use of photographs on book covers and as illustrations in their books.⁷⁹ Although Mian Mian announced that she did not consider herself a 'beauty writer' and refused to be a 'victim of commercial jugglery' by avoiding using her photographs on the novel *Candy*,⁸⁰ portraits of Mian Mian in a sexy pose are still used on the book's front and back covers. Other novels such as *Acid Lover* (Yansuan qingren, 2000) for example, are packaged with images featuring parts of women's bodies such as eyes, or feminine accoutrements such as high heels and lipsticks, on every page of the book. Portraits of Wei Hui are present on all the covers of her books, as they are on those of Zhao Bo and Hong Ying. Women writers are thus perceived by the Chinese public to take advantage of their gender to promote their book sales. Here, women writers' female identity becomes an object of attack. Through this they become the objects of attack as this form of self-promotion is considered frivolous in Chinese culture.

In spite of the consequences of the reform and the opening-up policy, which to some extent assimilated western ideas such as feminism, liberalism, and individualism, and the re-emergence of female sexuality from the state-controlled 'erasure of gender and sexuality' (Yang, 1999: 41), the appropriation of female sexuality by both the

⁷⁹ Although it is common for writers to use their photos on book covers, glam-writers such as Mian Mian and Wei Hui are deemed to deliberately attract attention by producing themselves as attractive, sexualized identities through the images they release.

⁸⁰ See <http://edu.sina.com.cn/2000-04-14/4/1809.html>, accessed on 17/12/2008.

market and women writers, has de-politicized women's literature of the last decade of the twentieth century, and underscored the market-driven trend of contemporary Chinese literature. These developments have created a problem for women writers who do not necessarily want to be labelled as 'glam-lit writers' or to be reduced to writing about sexuality or personal matters alone. According to Ferry, the idea of 'oversimplified notions of sexuality' and the 'hypervisibility of the female' (2003: 656) in Chinese women's writing in the 1990s, is suggestive of the problem of 'how to balance the public exploration of female sexuality with female authorship' (ibid). It also indicates a tension in contemporary Chinese literature when the market plays a vital role. As Ferry notes:

The seduction of 'woman' and woman as seduction in the media and market spheres undermines women's important roles in the political and social economy. Critics and publishers conceive of the value of women writers in contemporary Chinese society in limited terms. In revealing their ambivalence about their roles as women, women writers themselves relinquish the power they have as writers to create an alternative to the oversimplification of sexuality and self-determination in contemporary Chinese society (ibid: 675).

According to mainstream Chinese literary criticism, the works of the post-70s glam-writers have built up a representation of a 'common experience' of their generation (Zong Renfa et al 1998). Their unconventional images and portrayals have turned out to be a symbol for their generation. The 'innovativeness' of this group of women writers is mostly reflected through the representation of a supposedly 'common experience' and the demonstration of alternativeness or otherness, especially in terms of their attitude towards the female body and sexuality. In their writing, sex is perceived as a 'routine', 'outward privacy', and 'bodily desire and pleasure', the meaning of which goes beyond mere narcissism as the older generation thought (ibid). This focus has been the source of considerable criticism in mainland China. In contrast, western leading media channels such as the BBC and *The Times* tend to praise glam-writers such as Mian Mian and Wei Hui for their 'cultural breakthroughs'

in the content of and language used in the novels.⁸¹ However, the domestic criticism of these works is inclined to give prominence to literary degeneracy, morality corruption and spiritual degradation. As Mian Mian told the BBC World Service's The Ticket programme: '[i]t's very difficult for me as a writer and an artist. It's also very difficult for other artists. All we can do is [to] make the road easier for the next generation. This is our fate.'⁸²

The conditions of writing for writers in China have changed. As David Der-wei Wang states:

Writing in a postmodern era, Chinese writers have come to realize that writing does not have to be equated with political action and that literature cannot solve all social problems... Writing now becomes a facetious gesture, a playful action, that titillates rather than teaches, flirts rather than indicts (1994: 254).

Such critiques have raised questions such as 'what is literature' and 'whether contemporary Chinese literature is in decline' among academics and literary critics. The emergence of the post-70s glam-writers made alternative female voices heard in China's literary field in the 1990s, and challenged the role of mainstream literature in modern Chinese literary history. Having skipped the Cultural Revolution period and grown up in the New Era, the post-70s writers entered 'a more fragmented, but ultimately more positive, postmodern sphere of representation' (Dirlik and Zhang, 2000: 343), without feeling bound by cow-towing to tradition or the political past. They are not 'the bearers of enlightenment', but 'expressionists in an equivocal position' (ibid: 334). As Zhang Yiwu (dates unknown)⁸³ notes, these women writers 'built on nontraditional and un-Maoist notions of personhood, the subject, history, and reality' (ibid: 343). I shall discuss these critiques at greater length in Chapter 4.

⁸¹ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4326235.stm>, accessed on 12/11/2008.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Zhang Yiwu, Professor in Chinese and Literature at Beijing University. His works include *Quanjihua yu zhongguo dianying de zhuanxing* (Globalization and the Transformation of Chinese Films, 2006) and *Cong xiaodaixing dao houxiandaixing* (From Modernity to Postmodernity, 1997).

The Structure of the Thesis

In this Introduction I have briefly reviewed the history of Chinese women's writing in relation to its social, economic and political contexts and cultural traditions. By doing this I attempted to draw a picture of the development of women's literature in line with China's modernization during the twentieth century. I have then outlined the major characteristics of the five glam-writers' works, as well as some critical responses to their works. Here my key aim was to provide contextual information in preparation for the following analyses of the reception of their texts.

Building on this, my main focus in the subsequent chapters is an analysis of three different fields of reception of the five representative glam-writers and their works rather than a focus on the literary particularities of these works. I would like to emphasize here that work on the actual reception of Chinese literature by its Chinese audiences has almost never been done, and this constitutes my original contribution to field of knowledge of contemporary writing in mainland China. The three reading constituencies I investigate are Chinese literary critics as 'professional readers', actual women readers whom I interviewed in mainland China, and virtual participants on these glam-writers' personal blogs whose identities are unknown in offline contexts. The analysis of each of these three fields of reception constitutes a substantive chapter, following on from the Literature Review and Methodology (Chapters 2 and 3).

In Chapter 2 I shall draw on reception theory and reader-response criticism in particular, as the framework for considering my analysis of the diverse responses from different types of readers of these texts in mainland China. Since research on actual readers' views of literary texts has barely been done in the Chinese context, I make an original empirical contribution to the understanding of young urban Chinese readers' perceptions of their reading experiences with this. In Chapter 3 I shall discuss the methods I used to conduct my research with reference to feminist research principles and ethics. I shall also reflect upon my own positionalities in

different locations (e.g. UK and China) and the ways in which that exerted a certain impact on my research.

In Chapter 4 I shall look at the literary criticism of the glam-writers' works, analyzing the different types of critiques made by the literary critics of these writers' texts. I shall also explore factors which influenced the literary critics' views of these texts. Chapter 5 is an empirical study of fifteen women readers' reception of the glam-writers' novels, based on three months of fieldwork in southeast China in the winter of 2008. In this chapter I shall investigate the ways in which women readers responded to the novels, how they perceived the influences of these novels on themselves, and the factors which affected their responses to these texts. In Chapter 6 I shall elaborate what kind of online interactions readers engage in on the writers' blogs. Through two years of observation and participation on the five glam-writers' blogs between the summer of 2007 and the summer of 2009, I researched how readers and glam-writers communicated on the blogs. My overall aim is to understand how different reading constituencies in mainland China have engaged with the glam-writers' works, and how that relates to the Chinese state's sense of the perniciousness and negative influence on their readers of those works. Finally, I shall summarize my main findings and lines of argument to conclude my thesis. Now I shall turn to the major literature and theoretical frameworks which inspired, supported and challenged me at different points of my research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

I gathered the background material from different sources and areas for three different reading constituencies. For instance, in Chapter 4 where I discuss literary critical responses to the glam-writers' works, I focus on secondary writings about these works – most of which are written in Chinese - by Chinese literary critics and scholars as objects of my analysis independently from this literature review. Thus this chapter does not include all the reading I did for my research, but only covers the principal theories and ideas which stimulated and guided me at the beginning of my research.

Here I draw primarily on literature from western reception theory and reader-response criticism, which serves as the theoretical framework of my research alongside with feminist methodologies (which I shall discuss in the following Methodology chapter). I shall outline the works of some major reception theorists – those early male writers such as Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss emerged in the 1960s and 1970s whose ideas and works inspired me - and underline the convergent and divergent points of my research and these theorists' positions. I shall briefly mention the feminist works on reception theory and reader-response criticism by Janice Radway and Lynne Pearce from the 1980s and 1990s respectively, which I found particularly insightful for my empirical study of the women readers' reception of the glam-writers' works (I do not elaborate more on feminist works here because I shall discuss them in more detail in relation to the actual women readers' reading experiences in Chapter 5). Finally I base my blog investigation upon the literature on internet research and cybercultures, and on celebrity culture in particular as the latter may be considered one form of reception. Apart from these theoretical frameworks, empirical studies conducted to explore text-reader interaction and the reader's role in meaning-making and the reading process provided me with significant insights into the way my own research should be designed and developed. I shall begin by

offering a brief introduction to reception studies in mainland China.

Although Robert Holub distinguishes reception theory from reader-response criticism (1984: 12-3), both rely on a reader-oriented approach. Contemporary reception theory originated in the Constance School in Germany in the 1960s, and achieved its peak during the 1970s and 1980s (Iser 1989, 1978, 1974; Jauss 1982; Tompkins 1980). It was not introduced to China until 1984.⁸⁴ Before that, research on reader responses had remained a blind spot in Chinese literary history. Few studies of reception theory and reader-response criticism had been done in mainland China. This situation did not change until ten years later. Within the academy, the study of reception theory primarily relied on western theories and descriptive interpretations, but rarely explored and examined Chinese social and cultural contexts by means of empirical research. The application of reception theory has been practised in disciplines such as the arts and creative studies, translation studies, ancient Chinese literature, television and media studies,⁸⁵ but has not yet been used in sociology and social inquiries. Neither has reception theory been applied to empirical studies of actual readers' responses to certain literary works. This is thesis's contribution to studies of the reception of contemporary Chinese writers and their works in mainland China.

Much research has been carried out to interpret and evaluate literary works that are considered classical literature (*gudian wenxue*), serious literature (*yansu wenxue*) or high literature (*chun wenxue*) in Chinese literary history, looking at 'big issues' such as the nation, the people, or 'in-depth reporting' of a particular period or character.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Reception theory was first introduced by Zhang Li's 'Notes on "Reception Theory"' (关于“接受美学”的笔记) and 'Reception Theory – A New Prevailing Approach to Studying Literature' (接受美学-一种新兴的文学研究方法) published in *Wenxue pinglun* (Literature Review) December, 1983 and *Baike zhishi* (Encyclopedic Knowledge) September, 1984 respectively. It was further introduced by intellectuals such as Zhang Longxi in his article 'Renzhe jianren, zhizhe jianzhi' (仁者见仁,智者见智), published in *Dushu* (Reading) 3, 1984. See http://ebook.1001a.com/uploadfiles_6143/%CE%C4%D1%A7/%A1%B6%B6%C1%CA%E9%A1%B7%B6%FE%CA%AE%D6%DC%C4%EA%BA%CF%BC%AF/85/80417.htm, accessed on 2/9/2009.

⁸⁵ See <http://academic.mediachina.net/article.php?id=1580>, accessed on 18/5/2009.

⁸⁶ See http://www.china.org.cn/culture/2008-04/17/content_14968135.htm, accessed on 12/4/2009.

There is an absence of research on the reception of literature – popular and elite - by actual readers. This dearth carries dual implications. First, little attention has been paid by Chinese literary critics to the reader's role in interpretation and evaluation of literary works. Literary scholars have not yet shown any interest in examining readers' roles in, and contribution to, the construction of meaning. Thus, little importance has been attached to the reader's experience and activity in the process of reading. There is no systematic research on, and syllabus about reader-response criticism, which places the reader as a 'source of authority' (Freund 1987) in interpreting and understanding literary works. More specifically, no empirical studies have been done to investigate what effects the glam-literature I examine in this thesis has on its readers, although as indicated in the Introduction mainly negative effects have been asserted.

There is also very little literature which has been written on the reception of the Chinese glam-writers' works, although critical essays on these writers' works have been published in literary and academic journals since 1996. The only exception is the *Book of Criticism of Ten Beauty Writers* (2005) written by Ta'ai, which is not literary criticism in the traditional Chinese sense, but rather belongs to the category of cruel criticism, 'kuping', to use critic Bai Ye's term.⁸⁷ Ta'ai was condemned for 'not being able to differentiate the criticism of the writers from that of the works in his book', and thus 'making personal assaults on the beauty writers while criticizing their works'.⁸⁸ Assaults on the writer as a person shade into the processes of celebrity culture (Marshall 2006, 1997; Rojek 2001; Turner 2004) which also focuses strongly, and often either adoringly or condemnatorily, on the celebrity as a person rather than on her/his work or any talent (s)he may have. One might therefore argue that 'cruel criticism' gestures towards the arrival of celebrity culture in relation to these women writers. This is in part why I am concerned with the reception of these glam-writers'

⁸⁷ This way of categorizing criticism is not known in the west – it refers to the notion that a writer is attacked as a person rather than her work is analysed. Of course there are critiques of writers that refer to their private lives that in the west but such critiques are not known as 'cruel criticism'.

⁸⁸ See http://culture.163.com/culture/editor/news/050426/050426_143633.html, accessed on 2/11/2008.

works by different constituencies with different attitudes towards these writers and their works.

Major Theorists and Schools of Thought of Reader-Response Criticism

Advocated by influential figures such as Jauss (1982) and Iser (1974, 1978), reception theory is 'informed by the European tradition of philosophical phenomenology which proposes that the object of philosophical investigation is the contents of consciousness' (McQuillan, in Wolfreys 2001: 92), and is seen as a 'subversion of authority' from an author-text focus to a text-reader one (Freund, 1987: 10). Reception theory views the text as 'a function of its readers and its reception' (Holub, 1984: 148); the text 'lives only through the reader and the history of the reader's involvement with it' (ibid: 149). In examining the way Chinese readers including both literary critics and actual readers interpret and understand the glam-writers' texts, I too take the reader's role as central in producing and constructing the meaning of a text. But this also involves a consideration of the context in which the readers operate and respond. I shall therefore briefly address the influence of hermeneutics on reception theory, as it sheds a light on the 'effective history' of the reader to whose 'consciousness' and 'experience' I pay attention in relation to their socio-cultural and historical contexts.

As one major influential figure in hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer insists on 'the historical nature of understanding', conceiving it as 'the essence of our being-in-the-world' (Holub, 1984: 36-7). According to Holub, Gadamer calls for an 'effective-historical consciousness [*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*]' which he considers primarily as '[a] consciousness of the hermeneutical situation' (ibid: 42). Thus the social and historical context in which one lives, shapes one's worldview and provides the base for understanding the present. A reader's understanding of the past formed in part by her/his experience is not 'a barrier to understanding' (ibid: 41), but an essential and integral part of the reader's engagement with the text in which an

encountering of the past and present and an activity in understanding both take place.

Gadamer's hermeneutics is important for reception theory because 'it stresses that [the] interpretation of literature arise out of a dialogue between past and present readings' (McQuillan, 2001: 92). This is, of course, also the case in the Chinese literary tradition, and as I shall demonstrate in relation to Chinese literary critics' views of the glam-writers' works, they tend to draw on their experience of past readings, in particular of canonized works and classics, in their assessment of the glam-writers' texts. They therefore exemplify Gadamer's views of the past shaping present readings. However, Gadamer disappoints me in the sense that his view of readers is in many ways entirely abstracted. One of my aims in this thesis is thus to explore the way in which actual readers – not only literary critics but also women readers - receive these glam-writers' works.

Influenced by Gadamer's notion of the past influencing readings in the present, Jauss adopts the term 'horizon of expectations' to determine the aesthetic value of a literary work. According to Jauss, the 'horizon of expectations' has at least two distinct dimensions when the term is used to delineate the dialectical relationship between history and literature:

The horizon of expectations of literature distinguishes itself before the horizon of expectations of historical lived praxis in that it not only preserves actual experiences, but also anticipates unrealized possibility, broadens the limited space of social behaviour for new desires, claims, and goals, and thereby opens paths of future experience (Jauss, 1982: 41).

Jauss fascinates me because he connects the aesthetic experience of literary works with an individual's anticipation and lived experience informed by and performed within society. This link redeems 'the gap between literature and history', 'between aesthetic and historical knowledge' and more importantly, leads to a 'socially formative function' of literature which 'competes with other arts and social forces' (ibid: 45).

The term 'horizon of expectation' remains crucial throughout Jauss's (1982) elucidation of his aesthetic reception. According to Jauss, readers' horizons of expectations keep changing in accordance with the given historical period and culture. A literary work may present different values and meanings in different historical periods. Jauss's notion that the reader is endowed with an active role in determining the value of a literary work throws up questions such as whether or not a text has its own immobile 'objective' value, whether or not the reader plays a dominant role in determining the value of the text, and whether or not critics have the possibility to destabilise the text and overthrow existing principles of literary criticism.

I agree with Jauss that the past influences present readings. It is for this reason that I reviewed the history of Chinese women's writing in the Introduction, outlining women writers' place within Chinese literature at particular periods of China's history. I see this history as an important factor in understanding contemporary Chinese women's literature. Only with an awareness of the role women and women's writing have had in Chinese history, especially literary history, can we understand the reception of the contemporary glam-writers' works by the literary critics, the readers (women readers in particular) in actuality, and on the writers' blogs as I shall delineate in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. We can then, by virtue of the 'change of horizon' of their expectations and presuppositions, consider the readers' responses in the light of their historical and social contexts.

In Chapter 4 where the reception of the glam-writers' works by the literary critics is discussed, I shall consider the constraints imposed on literary critics by socio-political factors and literary traditions when they make their judgements. In this context, I am aware of the particularity of literary criticism in mainland and the 'narrow parameters' within which literary production was subordinated to the 'political goals of the state' throughout much of the middle of the 20th century (Thakur, 1997: 103). As Ravni Thakur summarizes:

Chinese criticism of women writers is hampered by two fundamental problems:

the limitations imposed by Marxist influence on its own critical tradition, and its inability to move beyond generalisations and platitudes. The overall importance of being politically correct hampers the possibility of radically different analyses of women's fiction (ibid).

In my analysis of the literary critics' reception of the glam-writers' works, I hope to provide a somewhat more nuanced representation of literary criticism in mainland China. One of the issues raised by the literary critics about the glam-writers' works is that they might influence their readers adversely. Since my own experience as a reader of these novels did not have, at least in my view, any adverse effects on me, I thought it important to investigate the actual readers' views of the influence that writing had, or might have had, on them. As Jauss argues:

The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectations of his lived praxis, per[*in*]forms his understanding of the world, and thereby also has an effect on his social behaviour (1982: 39).

This reads very abstractly, so I thought it would be helpful to analyze how actual readers respond to the glam-writers' works and perceive the effects of these works upon their attitudes towards life, their views of the individual and society, and social beliefs and behaviours. Whereas the reader's worldview and experience which shape the way (s)he understands literary works are informed by her/his social and cultural context, i.e. the 'lived praxis', literature may also have a counter-effect upon the reader's worldview, behaviour, and mode of thinking. I shall explore this in Chapter 5 where I discuss the reception of the glam-writers' works by the actual women readers.

While Jauss places the reader's 'horizon of expectations' at the centre of his theory, Iser focuses on what happens to the reader during the reading process. Borrowed from Edmund Husserl and Roman Ingarden, phenomenology is the major philosophical and methodological foundation for Iser's study of reader-response

criticism. Iser agrees with Ingarden that the role of the reader involves 'an action of *Konkretisation*', in which 'schematised views' can be *konkretisiert* (realized) (Iser, 1974: 274). This '*konkretisation*' refers to the reader's construction of 'the "virtual" reality of literature', which according to Mary Ellen Pitts, is parallel to 'the "virtual" reality of living' (Pitts, 1995: 65). Iser sees the reader's '*Konkretisation*' of a text as based on one's 'extra-literary norms, values and experience' (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 2005: 52). As Iser states:

The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader (1989: 274-5).

Ingarden regards the literary work as an 'intentional object' which requires the reader's consciousness in the making of meaning and promotes an 'intrinsic approach' to the reading process where the reader's cognitive activity takes place (Holub, 1984: 23-4; Freund, 1987: 140), whereas Iser redirects the attention of literary theorists from a pure cognition of the work itself to the text-reader interaction by introducing a 'transcendental model' (Iser, 1978: 38) of an ideal reader transcending both 'real' readers and 'abstract readers' presupposed by literary theorists (cited by Holub: 85). Iser defines his concept of the 'implied reader' as a term that 'incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualisation of this potential through the reading process' (Iser, 1974: xii). Iser's assertion that meaning is produced in the reader's experience of reading helped me understand why individual readers' responses to the same text may vary according to the ways in which their expectations change and their actualisation of a text takes place during the act of reading. In the same vein, Martin McQuillan argues that the realisation of a text relies on 'the interaction between reader and writing which produces meaning', and defines the text as 'the temporal experience of reading which actualises meaning, the experience of which is specific to each individual reader' (in Wolfreys 2001: 84).

Such meaning may, however, be destabilised in the sense that readers may produce different meanings of the same text every time they read it. In interviewing my women readers, I asked them about their impression of the glam-writers' novels and whether this impression had changed over time. By obtaining responses from second-time readers, I attempt to explore what extra-textual factors may influence the readers' responses to these novels during the process of reading such as their changing living circumstances, their engagement with other forms of art, and even their financial situation. As Iser argues:

One text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way... as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled (1974: 280).

'Indeterminacy' (Iser, 1989: 8) reflected in the reader's filling in of the 'gaps' leaves space for the reader's 'imagination' and 'projection'. Meaning, according to Iser, is the result of the interaction between text and reader as 'an effect to be experienced' rather than 'an object to be defined' (Iser, 1978: 10). To some extent, both Iser and Jauss call upon 'a determinate text (or sub-text)' (Holub, 1984: 150) by situating the reader 'in a prestructured activity' (Iser, 1978: 35) and the text within a historical framework respectively, in order to confront the particularity posed by the reader's subjectivity in the process of understanding and interpreting the text.

One particular respect in which Iser's work interests me lies in his view of reading as 'a pleasure' when 'it is active and creative' (Iser, 1974: 275). I found Iser's notion of reading as a pleasure relevant to the actual readers' reading behaviour. At present, more and more Chinese women readers, the young generation in particular, read for pleasure. An active selection of popular readings such as the glam-writers' works instead of serious and classical literature implies a particular desire and pleasure in relation to these texts. In Chapter 5 I analyse the women readers' reading history and habits, examining how they made decisions on what and by what means to read, and to what extent they perceived reading as a pleasure.

Although Iser's reader-response criticism is different from Jauss's (e.g. the former sees a literary work as an effect to be experienced by the reader and follows a phenomenological approach to examine the relation between the reader and text; whereas the latter considers the process of production and reception of literature in relation to history and focuses on the reader's 'horizon of expectations' at different historical periods), they both transfer the source of authority from the author to the reader, and see reading as a pleasure from the point of view of text-reader interaction and aesthetic reception. Both Iser's 'communicatory structure of fiction' (Holub, 1984: 92) and Jauss's 'fundamental categories' of aesthetic pleasure to which *catharsis* belongs (ibid: 78) give expression to their affinity with the notion of seeing reception theory as 'a more general theory of communication' (ibid: 108), to use Holub's phrase.

In evaluating a variety of different reception theories, Elizabeth Freund has claimed:

Crudely summarized, the point of departure in each story is always a dissatisfaction with formalist principles, and a recognition that the practice of supposedly impersonal and disinterested reading is never innocent and always infected by suppressed or unexamined presuppositions (1987: 10).

Holub takes this further, arguing that there is a vital deficiency in the trend and mode of theorizing, namely a 'lack of sociological grounding with respect to the reader' (1984: 135). Although Leo Lowenthal noted as early as 1932 that:

It is sociologically interesting that a task like the study of the effect of literary works, which is so important and central for research, has been almost entirely ignored, even though there exists in journals and newspapers, in letters and memoirs, an infinite amount of material that would teach us about the reception of literature in specific social groups and by individuals (cited in Holub: 45).

There has been little breakthrough in empirical research on reception theory done by literary scholars in mainland China, which has redeemed, or has the potential to redeem, the theoretical shortcomings of the established reception theories.

Jauss's and Iser's studies, along with other literary theorists and the Constance

school of thought, constitute a theoretical approach, which not only lacks 'empirical proof' (Holub, 1984: 97), but is also paradoxical in nature. As McQuillan argues, 'any theoretical category is not a conceptually unified critical position but consists of conflicting knowledge which is influenced by (and influence) other areas of thought' (in Wolfreys 2001: 93). Reader-response criticism faces its theoretical challenges such as formalism and post-structuralism (Tompkins 1980), including one within the reception theory itself which is empirical reception theory.⁸⁹ Holub argues for the necessity of conducting empirical research:

Studying actual readings of a given text can be and has been a beneficial undertaking for exploring the dynamics of the text and the sociology of the reader. Looking at the composition and habits of different readerships can supply information that helps clarify the entire literary process (1984: 146).

In this thesis I both draw on reader-response criticism by literary theorists such as Iser and Jauss, and make an empirical investigation of the Chinese women readers' reading history, habits and practices, particularly focusing on their responses to the glam-writers' works (see Chapter 5). Additionally, I also explore the diverse receptions of the glam-writers' works by readers from different social positions in both offline and online contexts, and the extent to which they responded to these works differently (see Chapters 4 and 6).

Reception Theory as Methodology

The term *reader* embodies both 'professional readers' who are literary scholars and critics, and 'lay readers' referring to readers without any professional training in reading. In terms of my research, in China the former category of readers consists of mainstream male critics who are mostly against the glam-writers' works, a few male editors and university professors who support these works, and feminist critics who tend to show more concern for a contextualised reading. The lay readers of the glam-writers' works I engage with in this thesis basically comprise women readers aged between twenty and thirty (by January 2008 when I conducted the interviews), and

⁸⁹ See Holub (1984) *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, pp. 134-146.

online participants/fans engaging in discussions and interactions on these writers' blogs. These three groups of readers are my focus in this thesis.

My research is significantly grounded in empirical work with actual Chinese readers. Through face-to-face interviews as one of the primary means of my research, I had a chance to talk with actual women readers, ask them about their views, perceptions and experiences of reading the glam-writers' works. In Chinese literary tradition, emphasis has been placed on evaluating the literary value of a piece of writing, either in formal or semantic terms. What has long been neglected by mainstream literary critics is the interaction between the text and reader. There is a gap too between professional and lay readers in the sense that the former's review and criticism of the works is assumed to have an influence on the latter, whereas the latter's voices are hardly heard by the former. There also exists a gap between the literary critics and writers in light of the different social and cultural contexts in which both live. Traditional approaches adopted by mainstream critics to assess literary works are therefore not necessarily appropriate as a criterion for judging literary works produced in a rapidly changing society. In my research I reflect upon how these gaps are formed between professional and lay readers in relation to the socio-historical context in which these texts are produced and received.

Apart from major male theorists of reader-response criticism, feminist scholars such as Pearce (1997) and Radway (1984) have also guided and inspired my research, especially during my fieldwork where I interviewed fifteen Chinese women readers and when I analysed the interviewing data (as I shall show in Chapter 5). Pearce's notion of 'emotional politics' gives insights into the reader's 'affective' rather than 'cognitive' response to the text (1997: 81), and her notion of the 'textual other' motivates me to develop further Iser's idea of text-reader interaction during the act of reading. In Chapter 5 I discuss this and examine whether and to what extent the text is perceived by its readers to have effects on them, and how extra-textual factors such as age, class, education, occupation, and living circumstances may exert an

influence on the readers' reading. Radway's study of female romance readers signals a 'shift from text to context' and presents the different ways the readers 'might actively negotiate, contest and renegotiate her relationship with the text' (in Pearce: 15). Radway and Pearce have made contributions to reception theory and reader-response criticism from an empirical perspective. Thus I took their projects in part as models for my own and developed my research based on and in part beyond their studies since they have been done in western contexts.

My research has also been shaped by my own context in that, unlike the theorists whose works inspired me, I was able to broaden the scale and horizon of the reception theory field by doing research on the reception on the writers' blogs. This is a relatively new way of exploring the reception of literary works, combining author-text, reader-text, and author-reader dynamics. On the writers' blogs, a particular kind of interaction between the writer and the reader takes place as the former engages with the latter in particular ways. A dialogue between both emerges via online communication to create a new type of text, which is produced by the reader's desire of knowing about the writer and advanced by the writer's willingness to engage. The text-reader and author-reader dynamics seem to be shifted and destabilised in the context of 'cybercultures' (Bell 2001).

The literature on cybercultures to date is extensive (Bell 2001; Hine 2000; Wolmark 1999). Not only writers but also readers with computer literacy become 'internet diarists', as the (we)blog is seen 'as simply another kind or function of the diary genre'.⁹⁰ Laurie McNeill (2003) argues that the phenomenon of web diaries or weblogs blurs the distinction between online/written and offline/lived life, life and text, virtuality and reality, and public and private writing. However, I do not focus on this kind of online writing, i.e. diaries, in this thesis. Instead, I consider the effects of the glam-writers' blogs upon both the readers and writers, and the way readers contribute to the reading, writing, and meaning (re)construction and negotiation on

⁹⁰ See <http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/biography/v026/26.1mcneill.html>, accessed on 12/3/2009.

these blogs.

David Bell affirms the fan's active engagement with, and participation in, the meaning-making processes of reception and reading (2001: 167). He goes on to attack the 'stereotyping which lends fans less cultural credibility, making them perhaps less worthy of intellectual scrutiny' by citing Kirsten Pullen's view that 'fans form an alternative community that rebels against mainstream norms and creates a space for ... open communication' (ibid). Bell's position does not only challenge the mainstream perception of the audience/fans as 'mere passive dupes' embodied in the 'culture industry thesis' (Hall 1981) and in contemporary Chinese literary scholarship, but also calls for an attempt to explore the meaning-making process in which the reader plays a vital role in the context of cybercultures and blogsphere in particular.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the reception of the glam-writers' works by readers on these writers' blogs, where the line between production/producer and consumption/consumer, and the public and private has been blurred. I shall investigate the ways in which both the glam-writers and readers use the blogs for interaction and communication, and in particular what intrigues readers in responding to the writers and producing their personal narratives on the writers' blogs. As Holub suggests: 'the appearance of reception theory itself c[an] be understood as simply one manifestation of a consumer-oriented society' (1984: 125-7). In the context of the Chinese glam-writers' blogs, the readers – online participants - actually play multiple roles, as both consumers and producers of blog texts, as well as generators of new meanings of those texts. For the glam-writers, on the other hand, who are now literary celebrities in mainland China, blogs are not merely a platform for communication but also a form of self-publicity and marketing. I therefore draw on the literature on celebrity culture (e.g. Marshall 2006, 1997; Moran 2000; Rojek 2001; Turner 2004) and examine the ways in which the glam-writers as celebrities, or 'star authors', to use Moran's term, and their texts are received on their blogs.

To sum up, in this short chapter I have briefly outlined aspects of reception theory and reader-response criticism by Iser and Jauss, who shift the emphasis regarding the source of literary meaning from the author and the work itself to the reader, focusing on the reader's central role in meaning-making and active engagement with the text. While Jauss's view of relating reception to literary history helped me to consider the historical and social context in which both critics and readers make their interpretation of the glam-writers' works, Iser elucidates the manner in which text-reader interaction takes place. Both Jauss's and Iser's views have inspired and influenced my research on the reception of the Chinese glam-writers' works by the literary critics and the actual women readers I interviewed. I have also mentioned the way in which empirical studies conducted by feminist scholars Pearce and Radway have guided and stimulated me in my fieldwork. In the following chapter I shall discuss the methodological and practical issues which structured my research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter I shall focus on the research methods and methodologies which I used for my research. As a graduate with little prior knowledge and experience of feminism and feminist research, I reflect on the manner in which certain ideas and practices informed by feminist research were constantly developed and challenged in my research process and how my research was affected by my own perceptions of positionalities and situatedness. Within the framework of feminism, I based my research on qualitative methods such as textual analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Relying on the notions of 'a partial perspective' and 'situated knowledges' in particular (Haraway 1988), I shall first touch upon the relevance and importance of these terms for my own research practice. I shall then outline the methods used to research the diverse reception of the Chinese glam-writers' works. Third, I shall discuss the problems and difficulties I encountered during the research process. This includes my own positionalities and the way in which they performed as both advantages and disadvantages at different points in my research.

Recent studies have been conducted to either focus on the major themes raised in the Chinese glam-writers' works, such as youth identity and cultural citizenship (Knight 2009; Weber 2002), or on the production and distribution of these texts and the social and cultural contexts in which the glam-writers took part in marketing themselves (Ferry 2003; Lu 2008). As previously indicated, however, research on the consumption of these texts has remained a blindspot within and outside the Chinese academy. Researching the impact of reading novels on individual readers' views and behaviours is not familiar to Chinese intellectuals and academics. In this thesis I decided to examine the indigenous reception of the glam-writers' works from different perspectives, including the actual readers who are currently under-researched in the Chinese context.

As the emergence of a group of glam-writers represented by Mian Mian and Wei Hui in the late 1990s has been seen by Chinese literary critics as a historical and socio-cultural phenomenon rather than a purely literary one, I chose to orient my research towards a sociological perspective. Based on the nature of my research as a multi-sited project in which the diverse receptions of the glam-writers' works was explored, I adopted a multi-method approach in my study through which I hoped to achieve a certain 'partial objectivity'. I researched three different reading constituencies as three major fields of inquiry, each with its own distinctive methodological concerns and processes: first, I used textual analysis in examining Chinese literary critics' interpretations and evaluations of the glam-writers' works; second, I conducted semi-structured interviews with fifteen women readers about their responses to these works in the actual field; third, I researched the glam-writers' personal blogs to uncover the participants' reactions to, and interactions with, these glam-writers through online participant observation (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: The Research Methods Used in Each Field of Reception.

Field of Reception	Research Method
Researching literary critics	Textual analysis
Researching actual women readers	Semi-structured interviews + thematic analysis
Researching online blog participants	Participant observation + thematic analysis

All three fields of inquiry require close textual analysis of the data collected both online and offline, apart from working on the particular site (i.e. the blog), where textual analysis was my primary means of research. In processing and generating the data, my research involved a substantial amount of translation from Chinese (Mandarin) into English, including translating documents (excerpts from literary critics' reviews and articles published in journals, magazines, and the internet), literary works (excerpts from the original novels which have not yet been officially translated into English), the full transcription of the interviews (the fifteen recorded interviews),

and the online texts produced on the glam-writers' blogs (containing the writers' posts, participants' comments on certain posts, participants' messages left to particular writers, and a few writers' responses to the participants, etc.). During the process of translation and writing up the findings, I encountered a variety of problems and uncertainties which were not merely linguistic difficulties in determining the exact meaning of the words, but also encompassed cross-cultural barriers and challenges partly as a function of my own positionalities shifting between different geo-cultural locations. I shall discuss them at greater length in this chapter.

Within the framework of feminism, there is no single method or methodological approach considered specific to feminist research practice (Jayaratne and Stewart 2008; Letherby 2003; Maynard 1994; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). As Stanley and Wise warn: 'the idea that there is only "one road" to the feminist revolution, and only one type of "truly feminist" research, is as limiting and as offensive as male-biased accounts of research that have gone before' (cited by Jayaratne and Stewart 2008: 53). Whereas feminists have become more conscious and reflexive in terms of the means of doing research, claiming that both quantitative and qualitative approaches are important to feminist research, the qualitative approach remains very prominent (Jayaratne and Stewart in Jaggar 2008; Maynard 1994). In this chapter I shall discuss my own concerns with the use of a range of qualitative methods and give a reflexive account of my impact on the research.

Partial Objectivity and Situated Knowledges as Research Principles

One of the key issues in feminist research is its critical view of objectivity and truth, in strong contrast to dominant traditional approaches such as (neo)positivism, relativism and certain social studies of science (Haraway 1988; Jaggar, 2008). Feminist empiricism advocates Harding's 'successor science' as 'good science' which 'investigate[s] and theorize[s] the social world from the perspective of women', based on the belief that 'feminist knowledge is better or truer because it is derived from the perspective of the outsider, the "other", and includes women's experience in research

as central rather than as marginal and deviant' (Letherby, 2003: 44). Dianne Millen (1997) challenges this feminist empirical approach by pointing out that it assumes that 'there exists a feminine conception of knowledge ... which has been excluded from the development of ideas about knowledge due to the exclusion of women's understandings from that process of development'.⁹¹ Based on the Marxist idea that 'women, as an oppressed class, have the ability not only to frame their own experiences of oppression but to see the oppressors - and therefore the world in general - *more* clearly' (emphasis in original), Millen suggests that feminist standpoint theory 'gives access to a wider conception of truth via the insight into the oppressor'. However, standpoint theory also raises problems for feminists, such as how to validate the question 'whether those with experiences of gender subordination can "see" power relations and their material situations better than can those who dominate' (Ramazanoglu, 2002: 75), and issues of differences in women's experiences and knowledge as 'multiple, partial, contingent and situated' (ibid: 76).

By conceptualizing 'feminist objectivity' as something 'about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object' (Haraway, 1988: 583), Haraway points to the necessity of taking a 'partial perspective' and simultaneously proposes several ideas by which I was inspired and which I incorporated into my own research practice. These include her reference to 'situated knowledges' (ibid: 583) and 'positioning' (ibid: 587) upon which I relied at different points of my research; her definition of 'rational knowledge' as 'a process of ongoing critical interpretation among "fields" of interpreters and decoders' and as 'power-sensitive conversation' (ibid: 590) on which I in part based my analysis of the literary criticism; her insistence on the ethics and politics of feminist research as 'the bases for objectivity in the sciences as a heterogeneous whole' to which I paid particular attention in interviewing my women readers and researching the glam-writers' blogs,

⁹¹ All references to Millen in this section were taken from her essay 'Some Methodological and Epistemological Issues Raised by Doing Feminist Research on Non-Feminist Women', *Sociological Research Online* 2 (3). At: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/2/3/3.html>, accessed on 3/5/2009.

and for me the most illuminating point she makes:

The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality. Its images are not the products of escape and transcendence of limits (the view from above) but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions – of views from somewhere (ibid).

Haraway's definition of objectivity inspired me to understand the 'partial views' that represent the diverse responses to a popular literary and cultural phenomenon in late 1990s China. I was also motivated by Haraway's 'positioned rationality' to analyse critically different voices from within Chinese literary circles and actual readers' experiences of reading the glam-writers' novels.

Haraway suggests that the goal for feminist standpoint theorists is science as 'better accounts of the world' (ibid: 579), claiming so-called 'subjugated' standpoints 'promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world' (ibid: 584). Whereas Haraway insists on a way of seeing 'from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful' (ibid: 583), i.e. from the positions of 'the subjugated', she also notices a stake of her positioning as 'romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions' (ibid: 584).

Critical positioning is, according to Haraway, 'the key practice in grounding knowledge' (ibid: 587) and achieving insight.

As a young Chinese woman, I interrogated my different positionings throughout my entire research. Not only was I particularly aware of the complex relationship between the researcher and the researched in feminist theory, but I was also well aware of the unequal positions among my research subjects themselves. For instance, the positions Chinese literary critics and actual readers occupy are different and unequal in terms of status in relation to literary circles: the former offer authoritative and professional readings of texts, whereas the latter are leisure-

oriented in their reading. Among ordinary Chinese audiences, different generations of readers (those born in the 1970s and early 1980s, and those born in the late 1980s and 1990s for example, as I examine in Chapters 5 and 6) tend to react differently to the glam-writers novels on the basis of their life experiences and understandings of past readings. It is therefore the case that the positions I examined during my research were partial and at the same time multiple, involving different moments in relation to the texts in question.

In a sense, I targeted research subjects in both 'powerful' and 'subjugated' positions. My decision to examine readings by established literary critics (both mainstream male critics and feminist critics) and online participants' textual exchanges on the glam-writers' blogs, instead of merely focusing on interviewing women readers, derived from the recognition that giving voice only to 'the subjugated' – the lay readers in my case⁹² - was neither theoretically nor empirically sufficient to represent the indigenous reception of the glam-writers' works by Chinese readers. By exploring what impacts these novels had upon lay readers, I aimed at two things: first, to examine Hall's (1981) assertion that the audiences are not 'cultural dupes' in the Chinese context; in fact not only the women readers, but also the blog participants generated new meanings of the texts in both offline and online contexts (see Chapters 5 and 6); second, to investigate how far mainstream literary critics' views of these novels' negative impact on the young Chinese readers (see Chapter 4) were reflected in actual readers' responses.

Engaging with other people in one's research always raises questions of hierarchy and power. This has been extensively discussed among social scientists and feminist researchers (Maynard 1994; Millen 1997; Oakley 1981; Opie 2008; Ramazanoglu 2002; Skeggs 1994). The discrepancy between the idea of a non-hierarchical

⁹² Most readers of these novels are usually younger than, or of the same generation as the glam-writers, and subject to corruption by these texts according to the state's official warning on the impact of the novels. It is in this sense that the lay readers are in a subjugated position and seemingly cannot express their views of these novels in an equal way to the critics.

relationship in theory (Oakley 1981) and a consistent and inevitable privilege of the researcher (Opie 2008) has its implications in both actual (real-life) and virtual (online) field sites. While some feminists argue that 'even non-scheduled interviewing and ethnographic methods can entail a deliberate separation of the researcher from the "subject" of the researched' (Maynard, 1994: 15), others such as Millen (1997) and Opie (2008) propose the empowerment of participants in order to counterbalance the researcher's power in the research process. During my actual fieldwork with women readers, I did not sense a strong power imbalance between myself and my respondents (including the interviewees whom I met and talked with, and blog participants whom I never met in actuality). The possible reasons for that might be threefold. First, the aim of my research was to explore the diverse reception of the glam-writers' works. This research topic partly determined the role my respondents performed and the way in which they reacted during the research process. Unlike other research topics which may entail potential threats or harm to vulnerable individuals or marginalized groups, for instance a study of domestic violence which requires respondents to describe their experiences of violence and may cause psychological pain to respondents, my project did not have any such implications for, and/or particularly discomfort, my respondents (although I asked some sensitive questions during the interviews). Since everyone may respond differently to a novel and there is no single standard to judge the response, I think that my respondents were at a more equal and better position to share and discuss their understandings and perceptions of certain novels without feeling stressed or threatened (although they themselves might think differently). I was also, in many ways, a reader just like they were.

Second, all my interviewees had direct or indirect personal relationships with me prior to or during the interviews. The sample was chosen on a snowballing basis, and part of the snowballing involved 'introducers'. Seven of the interviewees were former schoolmates and colleagues from different stages of my life both in China and in the UK before doing my Ph.D. Others were introduced to me by an 'introducer', someone

who was either one of the interviewees who knew me or one of my acquaintances who recommended the potential interviewee(s) to me but did not take part in the interview. Those who did not know me personally before the interview, were told about my academic and personal background by the 'introducers' and had a very similar level of knowledge of me as researcher as I had of them as the researched. This knowledge created prior to the interview provided the interviewees with a basis in terms of the kind of researcher they would share personal views and experiences with.

Third, due to the fact that I decided not to disclose my researcher identity on the internet, the blog participants in my study were actually not aware that I was observing their online exchanges. Although I disclosed myself to the five glam-writers whose blogs I studied before embarking on my research, explaining my study, my identity was unknown to almost all the blog participants. This factor allowed blog participants to act in the way they usually did and left their online discussions unaffected by my observation. The approach I adopted (not disclosing my researcher identity) might seem problematic in terms of questions of informed consent. However, I would argue that everyone who has internet access can get access to, and obtain information from, the blogs. The information available on the glam-writers' blogs is therefore already in the public domain, and open to everyone on the internet, regardless of one's intention of access. In this sense I did not breach the ethics of doing internet research (Hine 2005; 2000) and was cautious about the use of the texts obtained from the blogs. I shall discuss this further in the relevant section below.

The Impact of My Own Positioning on the Research

Recognizing the researcher's role in feminist research as part of the resource and input which can directly affect the process and outcome of the research, I was aware of the various aspects of the research process upon which I exerted a certain influence. For instance, my educational background and professional training in sociology and media studies during my undergraduate years equipped me with

particular ways of perceiving 'truth' and 'knowledge' which are different from feminist traditions and values, i.e. conditionally objective attitudes towards describing and reporting subjects within a not-so-objective academic discipline. This caused both epistemological and methodological dilemmas for me. While the nature of my interdisciplinary degree allowed me to touch upon major issues and debates in politics, journalism, media and cultural studies,⁹³ it at the same time did not enable me to interrogate the 'method of inquiry' and the construction of 'valid knowledge' (Millen 1997). I felt reluctant to and constrained in using a feminist approach, which is often different from, if not contradictory to, mainstream sociological methods, to conduct my research when I initially started my doctoral degree. A misunderstanding on my part, based on the notion that any approach to feminist/women's studies implies a way of doing research with a single feminist method, resulted in a resistance to committing myself to carrying out purely feminist research in my fieldwork.

This situation lasted for more than half a year after I started my Ph.D. Taking the 'Approaches to Women's Studies' course I realised that the courses on social research methods I took as an undergraduate showed an affinity with a masculine methodology and emphasized 'the maintenance of detachment and thus objectivity' (Letherby, 2003: 81), which had a tremendous impact on my research conduct in terms of the mode of thinking about and doing research. My undergraduate dissertation on 'gender inequality and stereotypical portrayals of women in Chinese television adverts' was a sorry experience, although it was ranked 2.1 and enabled me to apply for my Ph.D. at my current university. Methodologically, the dissertation included a combination of an online survey and telephone interviews, the former of which I then considered one of the most objective and fair ways of doing my fieldwork. I recall how I interviewed the five respondents (who also took part in the online

⁹³ I obtained my honours Bachelor's degree in Society, Culture and Media in June 2006 at the School of Political, Social and International Studies, University of East Anglia. My undergraduate studies trained me to perceive the world and do social research but a feminist consciousness was absent within that whole epistemological and methodological framework as I was taught it.

survey) via the phone and the way I treated them as 'the passive givers of information' (Maynard and Purvis, 1994: 15). I adopted a structured interview method by asking them pre-coded questions without offering any rapport and writing down their answers mechanically. I had got myself used to the way in which traditional non-feminist sociologists carry out their research and claim the objectivity and validity of their approach to knowledge and truth. I had little sense of 'the hierarchical power relationships' between the researcher and the researched within social research (Letherby 2003; Maynard and Purvis 1994; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002), and 'the potentially exploitative nature' of the methods more favoured by non-feminist sociologists (Letherby, 2003: 85).

Only after I had taken the 'Approaches to Women's Studies' course in the second semester of my first year, did I consider myself gradually converting into a feminist and began to change my view of what is called feminist research. This conversion had dual implications. In the first place, my knowledge of feminist theory produced a reconstructed view of gender inequality and women's lives and experiences, which was different from the one I had had as a non-feminist undergraduate. Within an academic atmosphere where people talked about feminism and sexuality in a normalized and scholarly way, and treated issues such as race, ethnicity, and nationality equally and friendly, I felt gradually able to move not only epistemologically but also pragmatically in the sense that I immersed myself in doing academic research from a feminist perspective.

In China, although the first wave of women's studies originated in the New Cultural Movement of the May Fourth Era at the beginning of the twentieth century, the current wave did not start until the mid-1980s among urban-based Chinese women (Chow, Zhang and Wang 2004). Women's studies did not initially emerge as an independent discipline, but was linked with sociology. When women's studies was first introduced to China, it had at least three different translations: *funüxue* (women's studies), *funü yanjiu* (women's research or research on women), and *nüxingxue*

(female studies) (ibid: 166). So did the term feminism. It can either refer to woman/feminine-ism (nǚxing zhuyi), or women's right-ism (nǚquan zhuyi), the latter of which seems to carry a more political implication. Nonetheless, neither of them articulates the exact meaning feminism embodies in relation to the politics of doing feminist research. For me, the word feminism refers to a chain of political, economic and cultural movements which aim to protect women and fight for gender equality. Feminism also involves a system of theories and practices centred on women's rights and gender differences. It is not entirely about women, but is more concerned with the differences between men and women, and among women themselves.

Being a feminist has a radically different implication in the Chinese context. By claiming myself as a feminist returning to do fieldwork in my home country, I had envisaged that my interviewees and contacts would question my self-identity and positionings, as well as my (mis)interpretation of the notion feminism in translation in China. When I did my interviews in 2008 in China claiming I was a feminist, I was frequently asked by both men and women what I as a feminist was exactly doing and how I was distinguished from a non-feminist. For example, one of the interviewees asked me the question 'do you feminists believe that women should work outside while men should stay at home to do housework?' One of my male friends challenged me and argued that by being one of the women readers I studied, I could not establish a neutral and objective ground on which my research took place. This statement, I think, was based on his assumption that by sharing similarities with my interviewees, I might know too much about my interviewees and therefore could not come up with, or extend, issues like a complete outsider who might think from different perspectives. However, I saw these similarities between my interviewees and me as a means to understanding their feelings and experiences better and deeper. I attempted to overcome the possible subjectivity or partiality caused by my own positionality and background by doing two things: first, I examined the reception of the glam-writers' works by different reading constituencies – including the literary critics and younger generations who are active on the internet - whose backgrounds

and experiences I did not share; second, I noticed individual differences in the responses made by my interviewees and reflected these in the analysis in Chapter 5.

My positioning in my research was informed by the emotions that accompanied that process. I shall therefore now turn to the issue of emotions. In her essay 'Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology', Alison Jaggar stresses the important role of emotion in the construction of knowledge. According to Jaggar, emotions are 'intentional and socially constructed', although 'we tend to experience our emotions as involuntary individual responses to situations, responses that are often private in the sense that they are not perceived as directly and immediately by other people as they are by the subject of the experience' (2008: 381). As my research interest derived from my undergraduate dissertation in gender inequality and the stereotypical (mis)representation of Chinese women, my initial thought was to continue my doctoral research on representations of women and sexuality in the media in contemporary China. Inspired by one class taken in my first year as a doctoral student where the novel *Shanghai Baby* (1999) by the Chinese glam-writer Wei Hui and its reception in both western and Chinese contexts had been contentiously discussed - the reception of the novel in the Chinese context was hardly discussed due to the limited time of the class and the limited number of Chinese students present in that class - I felt compelled to find out more about the domestic reception of novels by and about Chinese women. This resulted in an abrupt change in the orientation of my research focus on Chinese women's literature and its reception. This change did not only alter the arrangement of my supervision through the withdrawal of one of my supervisors, but also affected the research schedule and research activities including a revisit of my literature review and methodology. Both changes had an impact on my research progress and resulted in emotional fluctuations during the first year of my Ph.D. research.

In the middle of my second year, I heard the news on BBC radio about the disastrous earthquake that took place in Wenchuan in Sichuan province in central China on 12

May 2008. I had a strong emotional response to this catastrophe and struggled as to whether or not to join the Chinese Red Cross as a volunteer. After serious discussions with my supervisor, I decided to give up the idea of being a volunteer and eventually did not suspend my study halfway throughout my research. Nevertheless, the time and energy spent in grieving for the death and loss in the earthquake had a severe impact on my research schedule as it took me time to get control over my personal emotions and deal with these unexpected circumstances. Apart from these emergencies, certain anxieties haunted me at different points of my research. For instance, as a completely self-funded overseas research student, I used to have a concern about the extent to which I might be treated differently from those whose Ph.D. research was sponsored by various public organizations and institutions. To overcome these tough moments, I found that effective personal communication, for instance, advice-seeking sessions with colleagues and especially the supervisor, were tremendously productive and useful to me in terms of sorting out my emotions and getting back to a normal state.

Research Process and Field Sites

I started my Ph.D. in the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York in January 2007. During the first year of my Ph.D., I did background reading on the socio-historical and political contexts of Chinese women's writing from different eras during the course of China's modernisation, and reviewed reception theory and reader-response criticism in particular. I also took courses on Feminist Theory and Approaches to Women's Studies within the Centre, and training sessions on social research methods and postgraduate research skills in the department of Sociology and in the Graduate Training Unit. All this was undertaken in preparation for embarking on my Ph.D. research and drafting the introduction, literature review and methodology chapters. I initially started observing the glam-writers' blogs between August and October 2007, and drafted the chapter on the reception on the glam-writers' blogs in the UK. Then I returned to China to do my fieldwork, i.e. interviewing women readers in China between January and March 2008. I had planned to

transcribe the interview material immediately after each interview. However, for practical reasons such as lack of time and tiredness after a long day during which I had to travel over five hours by train to reach a city, I was unable to finish all the interview transcriptions during my fieldwork. In fact, I had to complete them after I returned from China in late March 2008. While doing interviews with women readers in five southern and eastern cities, I also visited four university libraries to collect material on critical writings and reviews of the glam-writers' works. I thus gathered secondary sources in the form of literary critics' commentaries on these texts. In the following section, I shall discuss each field site of my research in more detail.

Researching the literary critics' reception of the glam-writers' works

Due to the fact that the glam-writers are a relatively recent phenomenon on the Chinese literary scene since they emerged as a group in the late 1990s, literary criticism of these writers' works has mainly been published in domestic Chinese academic and commercial journals, newspapers, and magazines, with a small amount of articles available on the internet. No material has been published or edited in the form of academic books, except *A Book of Criticism of Ten Beauty Writers* (Shi meinü zuojia pipanshu, 2005) written by Ta'ai, an undergraduate author whose book, however, was criticised for making personal attacks on the women writers mentioned as already indicated. The only way to get access to those journals and magazines was through the subscribing universities and institution. So I had to return to my home country and make use of my contacts who were then either studying or doing research-based work at universities. For this material I therefore targeted Chinese university libraries (those based in Shanghai in particular because I think as the original background city in which the glam-writers and their novels emerged, literary criticism of these novels may have been produced in Shanghai first).

To access these libraries, I contacted some of my schoolmates who were doing postgraduate studies at Shanghai universities. Three of them agreed to lend me their university cards and told me their user IDs and passwords for access. One was

about to finish his Masters degree and thus did not have access to university facilities during the holidays (February was Chinese New Year and winter holidays for schools and universities). He recommended one of his friends to me (who was then studying her Master's degree at the East China Normal University and eventually became one of my interviewees), and this enabled me to use her university library. With their help I visited three universities in Shanghai and one in Changzhou which is my hometown, thanks to one of my interviewees who was then a second-year undergraduate at Changzhou Institute of Technology. Among the four universities I visited, Fudan University and East China Normal University are top universities, famous for their literature and Chinese language departments. Although the other two institutions, Shanghai University and Changzhou Institute of Technology, are not famous for Chinese literature and history, I visited them too in order to find possible alternatives to back up my resources.

I found the process of this search problematic though. To my surprise, few academic texts on the glam-writers' works were available in hard copy in those libraries. Although I found that the titles of some relevant essays published in journals or magazines were displayed in the library catalogues, hard copies were no longer obtainable, or did not even exist. For those with only electronic copies available, I downloaded and stored them on my removable disk by using desktops based in those libraries. I also photocopied relevant journal articles and took copies with me before leaving the libraries. After getting what I could find, I transferred all the data from my removable disk to my laptop, and built an archive of these materials I saved for future reference.

I then undertook some close textual reading and on the basis of this, I decided to categorize the literary criticism of the glam-writers' works into three major types based on the different issues literary critics tended to focus on. I shall elaborate on these in Chapter 4. For now I should like to indicate that I found undertaking research in an innately hierarchical field – traditional Chinese literature and literary criticism –

challenging; it situated me in an alienated position where the discussion and negotiation of the meanings of certain texts was difficult, due to the very limited accessibility of the critical texts themselves, and the attitudes expressed in them.

As suggested by Millen (1997), 'it is essential not simply to state that women are oppressed and start the research from there', because 'it is fortunately not the case that all women whom we might wish to study are in directly oppressed positions and lack any privilege whatsoever'. This is particularly true in the Chinese literary field. Researching the literary critics was one of the situations in which I, as a feminist postgraduate, directly sensed the power relations between 'the powerful' and 'the subjugated'. By this I mean two layers of relations: first, the relationship between the established male critics and editors (who marketed and to a certain extent made the glam-writers notorious) and the glam-writers; second, the relationship between mainstream male critics and elite women scholars (I do not mean to separate female critics from male ones for gender reasons. I do so here because I want to distinguish the different roles both play within the contemporary Chinese literary system). The first layer of relation shows that although the glam-writers made their voices heard by breaking with literary tradition and writing contentious works, they were initially passive in the market place, if not manipulated by the male editors, to represent their works in a way that led to them being viewed as contentious and received as such by the critics and public. The second layer indicates that whereas some elite women critics' voices exist within Chinese literary circles, they only have a limited amount of literary authority when suggesting alternative ways and perspectives of viewing these texts. Therefore, although both the glam-writers and women critics had a certain privilege in terms of making their voices heard, they were in a less privileged position to take charge of their own voices and participate in the literary mainstream compared to their male counterparts. They thus still represent a certain 'marginalization from authoritative knowledge production' (Ramazanoglu, 2002: 70). I shall explore both the mainstream critics' views and the marginalized feminist critics' voices in Chapter 4.

Being an outsider in the Chinese literary field, I was aware of the possibility of trusting too much my 'own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge' (Collins, 2008: 317). As a young Chinese woman who left her home country in her teens and has lived in British culture for seven years, I reflected on the impact of my life experience on my own view and understanding of these glam-writers' works. When I first read novels by women writers such as Ann Baby, I was interested in the way in which they described marginalized urban lives and desperate individuals. The kind of life portrayed in these writers' novels was radically different from the one I lived when I was a secondary school student in China. By the time I decided to do research on these texts in the UK, I had perceived a gradual shift in my interest from young women's views and ways of life in urban China according to a single writer's eye, to the literary phenomenon of the emerging group of glam-writers and the impact of their narratives on individual readers. This change was brought about by my life experience and shifting positionalities (from a secondary school student in China knowing little about other people's ways of life, to a postgraduate who has gained a variety of perspectives to view both the texts and the contexts of the glam-writers through her higher education in the UK, and now a feminist researcher back in the field).

With exposure to the British academy, disciplines such as literary and cultural studies, sociology and gender studies in particular, I began to notice certain differences between the Chinese and western literary fields (Thakur, 1997: 68) that result from different ideologies, discourses on gender, and social structures in both contexts. In relation to the reception of the Chinese glam-writers' works, critics and scholars in Chinese and western contexts seem to hold differing views in terms of their styles and forms of writing based on divergent views on what this kind of writing entails. While western scholars such as Griffin do not categorize the writing of these Chinese women writers as postmodern,⁹⁴ critics in Chinese literary circles tend to see novels

⁹⁴ At more than one of our supervisions, Prof. Griffin and I discussed the style and category of these glam-writers' texts. Prof. Griffin did not regard these texts as postmodern writing in terms of their style.

such as *Shanghai Baby* as 'stylistically postmodern' (Zhong, 2007: 224). Although Zhong's essay is poorly elaborated as little evidence is offered to show why the novel is postmodern, or quasi-postmodern, Zhong does touch upon some aspects of the novel which postmodernism connotes, such as a 'loss of a sense of connection among past, present, and future', a 'loss of meaning', the 'breakdown of traditional cultural values and expectations', and the 'rejection of fixed categories and of attempts to impose analytic frameworks or moral judgements' (in Jaggar, 2008: 343). Here the focus is on a certain content rather than on issues of style which figure much more prominently in western conceptions of postmodern writing (Lyotard 1984).

Acknowledging my own academic and cultural experience as 'a valid source of knowledge' rather than 'submerging dimensions of self in the process of becoming an allegedly unbiased, objective social scientist' (Collins, 2008: 317), enabled me to see my own positionalities as advantages rather than pitfalls in dealing with the different views of the texts from diverse audiences, both within Chinese literary circles (mainstream and marginalised critics) and outside of them (western intellectuals' views of these texts for example), as well as those of lay Chinese women readers. Considering the divergent views of these works among Chinese critics and western intellectuals, I reflected upon the ways in which certain conceptions and literary terms were received and distributed in Chinese society, and the differences in translation and understandings in both Chinese and western contexts. These differences were actually intensified during my fieldwork when asking my interviewees about their perceptions of reading these novels. I shall therefore now turn to my second field site where I explored the actual women readers' reception.

Researching the women readers' reception of the glam-writers' works

As Griffin notes in the context of literary studies and reader-response criticism, 'we have very little empirical knowledge of reader behaviour and perceptions' (2005: 179-80). This applies to the Chinese context too, since as already indicated there is little academic research that has been done on actual readers' reception of literary texts.

As critics assume the influence of literature on readers, research is necessary to find out if there is such an influence and what it is. This is well understood in the western context where audience research, particularly in relation to certain media such as TV and films, is quite common. It assumes, of course, that the 'consumer' is an important figure in shaping markets and this view is only just being developed in China. Thus I see a necessity for learning from actual readers about their perceptions of reading these texts, in order to overcome the problem that 'little importance has been attached to an investigation into the impact of reading books on readers' behaviour and views' (ibid: 180). Interviewing in this context is a 'useful research method for understanding people's views and perceptions as producers and consumers of literary texts' (ibid: 192).

I adopted the qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews in my fieldwork, as it offered flexibility and space for in-depth conversations with my interviewees without losing the structure of the interview.⁹⁵ The reasons why I chose face-to-face interviews instead of telephone interviews or E-mail surveys were two-fold. First, by introducing myself as the researcher of this project and communicating directly with the interviewees who either previously knew me or met me for the first time at the interview, I felt I could establish a better rapport with them by means of eye contact, gestures and nonverbal exchanges which could not be achieved in telephone interviews. Second, I wanted to draw my interviewees out to explore what factors (textual and extra-textual) might influence their reading experiences and perceptions of the impact those novels might have had upon them. Through face-to-face conversations, I thought I could take an active role in facilitating and supporting my interviewees' construction of their personal narratives. As DeVault states:

It is the interviewer's investment in finding answers, her own concern with the questions she asks and her ability to show that concern, that serves to recruit her respondents as partners in the search: the things said are responses to these words of this particular researcher. The researcher is actively involved with

⁹⁵ For the interview schedule and questions, see the Appendix 3.

respondents, so that together they are constructing fuller answers to questions that cannot always be asked in simple, straightforward ways (1999: 65).

In choosing and constructing the interview questions (see Chapter 5 and the Appendix 3), I wanted to build an 'open-ended' and 'conversational' structure which might 'encourage my participants to talk while avoiding structuring the interaction purely in terms of the researcher's perspectives' (DeVault, 1999: 65).

Sampling

The fifteen interviewees were all Chinese, female, aged between twenty and thirty, educated and urbanized. They were primarily selected on the basis of their age and education. Young Chinese women in their twenties with university-level education or equivalent, were likely to have come across or read contemporary glam-writers and their novels, especially those born in the 1970s (the post-70s writers). Women in their twenties in 2008 were teenagers attending secondary school at the time when the glam-writers and their works suddenly became popular and caused a sensation in the late 1990s. The age of the protagonists portrayed in these novels was also close to that of these women readers when they first read these texts. This formed one of the bases for their reading.

Location was also an important factor in choosing my interviewees, with regard to the availability of the texts and the likelihood of them having been read. Zhang and Shavitt's study of cultural values among the Chinese X-Generation⁹⁶ who live in certain Chinese cities informed my decisions in this. As they stated: 'The Chinese X-generation is partly the product of Chinese modernization and global marketing ... Geographically, most of the cities are located along the east coast of China' (2003: 23). Based on the assumption that young educated women living in metropolitan cities such as Shanghai and Shenzhen, and the neighbouring cities, had a higher likelihood of having read the glam-writers' novels than those who lived in rural or less

⁹⁶ The Chinese X-Generation refers to young people aged 18-35 years with a higher education and income, according to Zhang and Shavitt's study in 2003.

advanced areas, I chose my interviewees from my home region.⁹⁷

My interviewees came from eight cities in mainland China, and were interviewed in the five cities where they worked or studied (see Figure 3.1).⁹⁸ Among the fifteen women, two worked and were interviewed in Zhuhai, which is the neighbouring city of Shenzhen in Guangdong Province in southern China, including one who was born there. One was born and interviewed in Suzhou, a neighbouring city of Shanghai and the number two city in Jiangsu Province in the southeast of China. One was born and interviewed in Shanghai. Two worked and were interviewed in Shanghai, but were born in Changzhou, which is the number four city in Jiangsu Province, and is the hometown of the glam-writers Zhao Bo and Zhou Jieru.⁹⁹ Four were born and interviewed in Xuzhou, which is the third largest city in Jiangsu Province. One was born in Xuzhou but studied and was interviewed in Changzhou. Four were born and interviewed in Changzhou, including one who worked in Shanghai, one in Singapore, and one who studied in Changchun, the capital city of Jilin Province in northern China.

⁹⁷ I come from the city Changzhou, which is one of the economically and culturally advanced areas in the southeast part of China. Thus I started this research from my home town and with people of whom I had a better knowledge compared to those from other places.

⁹⁸ The eight cities where the interviewees came from were Zhengzhou, Zhuhai, Xuzhou, Shanghai, Suzhou, Changzhou, Nantong, and a certain city in Shandong Province which the interviewee did not specify during the interview. The five cities in which my interviews were conducted were Zhuhai, Changzhou, Shanghai, Suzhou, and Xuzhou, as shown in Figure 1 overleaf.

⁹⁹ Zhou Jieru (b. 1976), born in Changzhou, glam-writer who initially became famous for writing stories on the internet in the 1990s. She quit writing and migrated to the States immediately after becoming famous. Due to a lack of material and resources on her texts and readership, I did not include Zhou's work as part of my research.

Figure 3.1: Map of China with the Cities Where the Interviews Took Place.



Source:

<http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?hl=en&ie=UTF8&oe=UTF8&msa=0&msid=112326252151125390320.0004876839432cb1ad6de&ll=29.190533,114.213867&spn=26.685672,39.594727&z=5>, accessed on 12/11/2009.

The cities which my interviewees were from or based in, are located in the southeast and southern part of China as shown in Figure 3.1, where the overall level of the economy, GDP and education is relatively high.¹⁰⁰ Shanghai is China's chief industrial and commercial centre and one of its leading centres of higher education and scientific research. Zhuhai is one of the four Economic Zones in China, and has rich educational and research resources. Suzhou, Changzhou and Xuzhou are the top five cities in Jiangsu Province, whose economy and education are ranked number

¹⁰⁰ See http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200212/19/eng20021219_108742.shtml, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/english/200012/05/eng20001205_56970.html, and http://www.zhuhai.gov.cn/english/Citynews/200708/t20070821_28310.htm, accessed on 8/10/2008.

two among the twenty-three provinces countrywide. The five cities where the interviews took place are all university cities with a population from 1.2 million (Zhuhai) to 19 million (Shanghai) in 2008.¹⁰¹ At the end of the 1990s, copies of the post-70s texts initially became available in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, then spread to the south and eastern part, and later to central and northwest China. It was comparatively easier therefore for readers from these more economically advanced areas to get access to the glam-writers' works.

My interviewees were invited to participate in my research on a snow-balling basis. Among the interviewees, four were journalists/reporters who knew each other well and worked for the same local newspaper in Xuzhou city. Two were colleagues who worked for an employment and migration company in Zhuhai city. Seven of the fifteen interviewees were women whom I had known before the interview took place. Five of these were my former classmates from different stages of my school years. Among these five, one was my classmate in primary school, three were secondary school classmates and one was my coursemate at the University of East Anglia in the UK. One of the remaining two women used to be my colleague in the Shanghai office of a UK-based travel company,¹⁰² and the other is my cousin who had indicated her special liking for one of the glam-writers' works before the interview. The other eight women whom I had never met prior to the interviews, were either colleagues or friends of my acquaintances.

In terms of education two interviewees were students pursuing their first degrees, and two were postgraduates having or studying for a higher degree at the time of the interview. The other eleven women had all obtained a Bachelor's degree in various disciplines such as English, Culture and Media, Linguistics, Chinese Literature,

¹⁰¹ See <http://www.chinatoday.com/city/a.htm>, accessed on 8/10/2008.

¹⁰² I did my undergraduate degree at the University of East Anglia from September 2003 to June 2006, during which time I met and became a friend of Kitty (F1). Kitty returned to China in 2006 after completing her first degree in the UK, and worked in an employment and migration company in Zhuhai. I went back to work for a UK-based travel company in their Shanghai office from June to December 2006, during which time I was a colleague of Fiona (F4).

Education, Psychology, Journalism, and Law, etc. There were also women with a Business, Accounting or Music background. Twelve out of fifteen participants who were in employment at the time of the interviews, were drawn from the professions of financial accountant, language training director, emigration consultant, journalist, reporter/editor, sales representative, assistant lawyer, as well as university students. Apart from the three participants who were studying at universities at the time of the interviews, eleven participants were employed full-time. One had just quit her full-time job before the interview took place. Three out of fifteen interviewees had experience of studying abroad. Eleven women came from a one-child family. Only two women were married. One was divorced. None of the interviewees had children at the time of the interview. The education, occupation, family and marital status of the interviewees are important because they have an effect on these women's life choices and their perceptions of literary works, as I shall demonstrate in relation to the lifestyles described in the glam-writers' works in Chapter 5.

The interview process

I did fifteen interviews in China between January and March 2008. Before returning to China, I sent an electronic mail (in Chinese) to all the potential interviewees, explaining who I am, the nature and aim of my research, and the content of the interview questions, how long the interview would take, and how their participation would help my research project. In the e-mail all the interviewees were also informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, and told of the use and analysis of the data collected from the interviews and of the potential publication of interview data in the final thesis. In the informal e-mail correspondence with my interviewees prior to my returning to China, I found an interesting phenomenon among many interviewees: they actually became more interested in me as a Ph.D. student and my life in the UK than in the research topic I was undertaking. By answering their questions such as 'What are you going to do after obtaining your Ph.D. degree?' and 'Is it the same to study a Ph.D. in the UK as to do it in China?', and sharing some of my experiences of living abroad, I shortened the distance

between the interviewees and me, and encouraged them to participate in my research. On the other hand, I felt that I was regarded as 'superior' (Tang, 2002: 709) by doing a Ph.D. in the UK. According to most of my interviewees, I was the only Ph.D. student they had ever known. When I subsequently did the actual interviews both the fact that some of the interviewees knew me and the prior email exchange helped me to create a certain intimacy (Phoenix, 1994: 50) between the interviewees and myself.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked my interviewees to sign a consent form, which also asked for basic demographic and contact information (see Appendix 4). All the interviews only took place after the consent forms had been signed by the interviewees. I found that my interviewees and I were comfortable in each other's company. This created a more equal position for both the interviewees and me. I did five interviews in my hometown Changzhou. Two took place in local cafe bars which both the interviewees and I were familiar with. One took place in the meeting room of a company which my interviewee worked for at her request, because she lived far away from her workplace and preferred to meet me there. Two interviews with younger women were conducted at my home. As they were both university students and happened to be in Changzhou at the time of the interview (one studied at a Changzhou university but was from another city Xuzhou which is about 300 miles from Changzhou; the other was born in Changzhou but studied at a Changchun university which is in the northern part of China), I felt that inviting them to my house and having the interviews in an informal setting also helped the interviewees feel relaxed to talk. This decision proved to be effective. After the interviews, both interviewees told me that they liked the way they were treated as my younger sisters on the one hand, and my respondents on the other.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ One of these two interviewees was my cousin, and the other was the cousin of a friend of mine who was also the introducer of this interviewee to me. When they arrived at my house, I received them with tea and biscuits from the UK, which they liked very much. They also asked me about English tea culture and the differences in tea culture between China and the UK. I answered those questions and we had interesting conversations before the interviews started.

In terms of the other four cities where I conducted the rest of the interviews, I had to travel to the sites by means of public transport (by airplane or train according to the distances between the destination and my hometown). There were several constraints to my journey to those far-away cities to reach my interviewees, apart from financial considerations (although the travel expenses to those cities were not low, they were affordable). For example, extremely bad weather could postpone or cancel my travel schedule. At the end of January 2008, most parts of China suffered very heavy snow, the worst for the last two or three decades, including all the five cities where I conducted my interviews. Four interviews had been scheduled between 28 January and 1 February 2008 in Xuzhou. It would have taken around five hours by train from Changzhou to Xuzhou under normal conditions. However, due to the heavy snow, certain lines were closed and no further notice was given regarding the re-opening of those lines. So I decided to travel by train from Changzhou to Nanjing (the capital city of Jiangsu province) and changed there to a coach to get to Xuzhou. It took me one and a half hours to reach Nanjing, two hours to wait for the coach to Xuzhou, and another six hours to reach the destination. I had to postpone my scheduled interviews on that day to a next date because I arrived in Xuzhou at midnight and had a tiring day during the journey. Thanks to my friend who was the introducer between me and all the four interviewees in Xuzhou, I could eventually check into my hotel.

Fortunately by the time the heavy snow fell, I had finished my two interviews in Zhuhai, the farthest city from my place (about 1000 miles) which took me around two hours by air and two hours by coach to reach. For geographical reasons,¹⁰⁴ I had decided to fly from London to Hong Kong as my first destination so that I could travel from there by boat to Zhuhai. Since there was no direct flight from Changzhou to Zhuhai and it took too long to travel to Zhuhai by train (around 15 hours), flying directly to Hong Kong and travelling from there to Zhuhai seemed the best and

¹⁰⁴ Hong Kong and Zhuhai are on the opposite sides of the river Zhujiang. The journey between the two cities is about one hour by boat.

shortest way to plan my journey back to China. So I flew from London on the first day of 2008 and arrived in Zhuhai by boat on 3rd January. As the Chinese New Year's holiday was from 1st to 3rd January and it was not acceptable to do any work during the New Year holiday in China, I did not want to disturb my interviewees on the last day of the holiday and checked into the hotel. I also made use of that night on 3rd January to do sightseeing in the city and get familiar with the surroundings where my interviewees worked, so that I knew the place better and found a nearby coffee shop as the interview point for the next day.

The place of conducting my interviews was either a local cafe near the interviewees' workplace, or a local hotel room where I stayed overnight if it was not possible or convenient to meet my interviewees during the opening time of the cafe bars. For interviews conducted in cafe bars, prior to each interview, I chose a remote table which was not passed by many and asked the waiter to leave us alone unless we requested anything. For interviews in hotel rooms where I stayed, I switched on the button to inform cleaners not to come in. All the interviews were carried out with the least possible disturbance. During each interview, I arrived fifteen minutes earlier and made sure the recording equipment functioned well. The duration of the interviews was between one and one and a half hours. During the interview, none of the interviewees questioned the medium I used for recording. I carried my laptop and a microphone with me at all the interviews, as I used the software Cool Edit Pro 2.1 which can be downloaded free from the internet. This software was particularly useful for the transcribing process as it allows one to stop the recording at any time and start at any point without having to move back and forwards between each slot. It also has a noise-reducing function which helped me to listen to the clearer version of the recording especially when those interviews took place in public areas such as a cafe bar in a city centre at busy times.

To my surprise, in places such as Shanghai and Zhuhai where I had expected the interviewees to read more novels and have more to say about their opinions and

experiences of those novels due to easier access to these texts, I found that some had not read any complete version of these writers' works – they only knew about these glam-writers' names and the uproar caused by them. Two interviewees from Changzhou too had only heard about the glam-phenomenon through articles published in newspapers, magazines and on the internet. It was those in cities such as Xuzhou which are less economically advanced and farther from the areas where the glam-writers' novels were initially distributed, who had read more of these novels and provided more narratives of their personal experiences. This finding showed a striking divergence from my assumption of the likelihood of respondents having read the texts and the reading history of the actual readers with whom I spoke. In the case of the four interviewees who had not read any of these texts, I focused on their perceptions of the glam-phenomenon and their views on the hypothetic impact of these novels.

When interviewing women readers from different occupations, I found slight differences in their reactions and behaviours during the interview. For example, when talking with my interviewees who were journalists and editor-reporters in local newspapers in Xuzhou, I was surprised by their reactions to me and to being interviewed. They told me that although they had interviewed many people from different occupations, it was the first time that they themselves had been interviewed, especially by a woman of a similar age but with experience of living in another culture. They also tended to be more talkative and willing to share personal experiences with me, partly due to the nature of their job which trained them to cope with unfamiliar situations better and more quickly, partly because of their wider experience of reading the glam-writers' novels which prepared them better for constructing personal narratives and expressing views on these texts. Other women, for instance, who worked as an accountant or were university students, behaved slightly nervously and passively. The Xuzhou women took a more active role and made the atmosphere of the interview more interactive. Taking this into consideration, I had to spend more time and adopt different strategies, e.g. ask more warm-up and inspiring

questions, to motivate those less active interviewees to participate in the interviews.

Limitations of the sampling

In comparing survey and in-depth interviewing, Griffin points to a difference in the 'degree of representativeness in [their] sample', suggesting the latter method is 'less intent upon generalising about a specific group of people than on understanding the views of a set of individuals' (2005: 184). While focusing on the views and experiences of my interviewees through their narratives, I also realised the limits of my sampling such as neglecting and silencing voices from different groups of readers such as women from less advanced cities and rural areas.¹⁰⁵ My sense of similarity with my interviewees owe to our shared educational background (dating to before I studied abroad) and experience of living in urbanized cities may also have led to an oversimplification of the social contexts in which the interviewees responded to the novels, and an overgeneralisation of individual readers' experiences of reading and perceptions of the impact of the reading. However, research of this kind is very much without precedent in mainland China, and as Chapter 5 will show, yielded some interesting findings.

On the one hand, my similarities to almost all of my interviewees in terms of age, education, ethnicity, experience of reading these texts at a certain period, and 'relative positions in the social formation' (Phoenix, 1994: 50) situated me in a more advantageous position than other researchers whose social positions are quite different from the researched¹⁰⁶ and who thus have to take into account differently issues of class, race, ethnicity, cultural and political sensitivities, and minority groups.

By being a young Chinese woman of a similar age, I found that my interviewees were

¹⁰⁵ Although the chance of people in rural China reading these glam-writers' works may well be much less than that of the population in urban and metropolitan cities, it is also likely that women migrants from rural areas to the metropolis read these works and they may have a different reception from those born in the metropolis.

¹⁰⁶ For instance, Canadian academics Gaskell and Eichler did their feminist research with a group of Chinese academics in China. Despite their 'positional advantages', they confessed to experiencing 'little power in the planning of the research', 'feeling themselves as a burden rather than a boon at many points during the process' (Gaskell and Eichler: 2001). Other examples include white feminist researchers interviewing black women, feminist academics interviewing women politicians, or others who interview people 'quite unlike themselves in many respects' (Griffin, 2005: 183).

relatively at ease in disclosing their private lives to me, compared to, for example, a western woman of a different generation. On the other hand, differences between the interviewees and myself such as personal experiences (studying abroad vs. living in one's home country), academic disciplines, occupation (student vs. employees with income), and marital status (single vs. married) also made for different positionalities and power dynamics in the interviews (Tang 2002). While younger interviewees, for example, tended to position themselves as 'inferior' by showing a more modest attitude to me and my questions, older and more experienced women operated the other way around. Interviewees who were married or had stable relationships with their partners tended to respond more readily in terms of their honesty and calmness when asked personal and sensitive questions. In this case, I often felt less guilty than when I interviewed those with less experience who were shy of sharing personal details with me. When they refused or felt reluctant to answer further questions, I stopped immediately and asked easy questions such as 'Do you recommend anything nice to drink in this cafe?' instead.

The feminist insistence on the vantage point of feminist researchers as being 'consistently privileged' in the research process (Opie, 2008: 371) is suggested on the basis that a researcher cannot 'disclaim her privilege with respect to the participants, in terms of her greater knowledge of the issues raised and of the theoretical framework of the research and of social life generally' (Millen 1997). While noting that 'the analysis of experience necessarily means the exploitation of experience to the detriment of the participant', and that 'the researcher's re-interpretation of that experience will change its fundamental meaning to the participant', Millen also suggests that 'the participant will always own the construction of meaning she has ascribed to experience, regardless of the interpretation placed upon this by the researcher within the publication of his or her work' (ibid). The researcher's privilege seems to exist independently of the participants' experience in that 'the *researcher* is the one who has been motivated to explore the theoretical ideas before conducting research, and to try to construct knowledge from experience'

(ibid, emphasis in original). Based on my experience in the fieldwork, I shall demonstrate below that the researcher's privilege is not 'fixed', but often 'fluid' and shifting between the researcher and the researched (Millen 1997; Phoenix 1994; Tang 2002).

Although I tried my best to avoid any subjective sense of a hierarchical relationship between my interviewees and me, on a few occasions I sensed power differences. For instance, before conducting my fieldwork, I asked my potential interviewees to participate in my research and explained to them my research purposes. They reacted in a way that suggested that they saw me as an expert in this field and as having fuller knowledge of the glam-writers' works. They also referred to my writing on my own blog with compliments and apologized if they had not visited my blog or read any of the writers' novels. In terms of asking about sensitive topics such as about drug use, alcohol consumption, and sexual experience, considered extremely personal and even rude if asked about in a public way in China, I felt it was an absolute privilege of having a 'legitimate' reason to learn about and interrupt other women's privacy and personal lives.

Nonetheless, the 'powerlessness' of the interviewees could soon be compensated for at the beginning of the interviews, for example when interviewees requested to see the interview questions before the interview took place and often required one or two minutes to read them. Power shifting could also happen if interviewees refused to answer certain personal questions. One interviewee refused to answer a set of questions before the interview when I passed her the list of questions as she had requested. While asking sensitive questions related to the use of drugs and alcohol and to their sexual lives, the interviewees could counterbalance my power as questioner by refusing to answer questions or making answers as brief as they could or the worst situation – giving false answers. One of my coursemates used to share with me many of her personal stories including about relationships with men at university. When asking about her sexual experiences in the interview, I could sense

that she was not giving an honest answer to that question based on my previous memory and her embarrassed facial expression at that moment. Under this circumstance, I could only judge from other answers with respect to this interviewee's lifestyle, view of marriage and family, and so forth. To my surprise, some interviewees were braver than I thought in respect of sharing personal experiences. At two interviews, there was more than one interviewee present.¹⁰⁷ When asking sensitive questions, I asked the others who were not being interviewed to leave for a while so that the interviewee could answer the questions without that audience. However, the interviewee insisted that it would be alright if they stayed. I learned from this that women might sometimes be more likely to disclose information about themselves to other women who know them well if the former knew that the latter would do the same afterwards.

In some cases I as researcher sensed my 'powerlessness' in exchanging ideas with my interviewees in a positive way. I felt the interviewees were empowered through expressing their views on a certain topic, which outweighed my expectation and knowledge of that field. For example, one interviewee told me about the sub-categories of the brand Louis Vuitton in talking about her attitudes towards the glam-writers' lifestyles. Another interviewee told me about her profession as a lawyer and her experience of living and working in Singapore, of which I had little knowledge previously. On some occasions, my interviewees discussed their views of the glam-phenomenon as a socio-cultural phenomenon and analyzed possible reasons and the contexts for these writers' emergence, based on the news and review articles published in the domestic media after 2002, which I was not aware of, or did not have access to. I felt that they knew certain subjects better than I did.

My positionality as a postgraduate student studying in the UK returning to do

¹⁰⁷ The first situation was when I interviewed four colleagues in Xuzhou. We had dinner together in a café bar and then started the interview after the dinner. They were all close friends and told me that they did not mind if the other three were present at the interview. The second situation was in a café bar in Zhuhai, where I interviewed one of my coursemates and one of her colleagues. The latter told me that she'd prefer my coursemate to be present at the interview.

fieldwork in my home country situated me in an in-between position as an 'outsider within' (Collins 2008) and 'insider outside'. By going abroad for secondary and higher education, I automatically abandoned the native environment in which I had grown up and received primary education. I was therefore an 'insider outside' among the interviewees with whom I shared a common cultural, ethnic, and social background until leaving the country. I felt an intimacy at the same time as a distance when talking with them. They asked me questions about the differences between the UK and China, which automatically set me apart from them. They also expressed a strong feeling that they wished to go back to student life again because of the stress they experienced in their workplace and more generally. By elaborating the differences between my own country and the country where I live and study, I felt my identity as a young native Chinese woman was destabilized, if not questioned. In fact, in answering questions from my interviewees at different stages during my fieldwork (when I had e-mail exchanges with them before going to China, when I was there and before or after the interview, and after I left and kept in touch with them), regarding my different life trajectory in the UK, I felt that I served as a bridge for them to learn and compare differences between Chinese culture and western culture based on my knowledge.

While getting used to being identified as an oriental postgraduate studying at a UK university and thus an other in the west, I am also a young middle-class woman born into a wealthy Chinese intellectual family, privileged by doing a Ph.D. overseas. Haraway argues that '[f]usion is a bad strategy of positioning' (1988: 585). I would argue, based on my experience in western academe and in my native country, that fusion is not only 'a bad strategy of positioning', but also a mission impossible. Recognising my own positionalities and situated knowledge in relation to my interviewees, is to admit the partial perspective I occupied when doing the research, and is thus important for analysing the differences among individual women in their reception of certain texts.

The transcribing process

I transcribed the fifteen interviews within the four weeks after completing all the interviews. One of the biggest problems that I had during the transcribing process was that of translation between two languages. The challenge of translating simple English terms into Chinese, such as 'feminism', has been discussed by Chinese scholars (Chow, Zhang, and Wang 2004). It is the same the other way round. In my fieldwork all the interviews were conducted and recorded in Mandarin. During the process of transcribing, I came across various points where I found it difficult to choose appropriate English vocabulary to deliver the meanings my interviewees had implied. In order to achieve this, not only did I need a good command of English and a certain level of translating skills, but I also needed to bear in mind that the translation could only be complete when relating the meaning of the words to the local context in which the conversation took place and the cultural context in which the interviewees grew up and formed their value systems.

There were many instances of uncertainty of the meanings of the words my interviewees used during the interviews. To take a simple example, several interviewees mentioned, at the time of interview, the word 'pingfan', either when discussing a certain sort of life they wanted to live, or referring to a kind of person they hoped to be or disliked being. The word pingfan literally means banality, commonness, prosiness, triteness or triviality, if one looks it up in a dictionary. It could, however, indicate different meanings when applied to different contexts. In the first case above, pingfan possibly meant a normal and peaceful life free of disturbance and up-and-downs. In the second case, nonetheless, it could carry dual meanings: either a person who is even tempered, which is positive, or someone who has no goals in life and is not competitive, which may not be good. The exact meanings of this word can only be judged and translated in relation to various factors such as the context, the interviewee's personality based on my previous knowledge (if I knew her before the interview) or first impressions (if I met her for the first time in the interview). I do not and cannot deny the possibility of appropriating the meanings

of the interviewees in the process of translating and writing up. Although I tried my best to avoid meaning appropriation and to translate the interviewees' narratives in relation to the local contexts, I can only expect to achieve 'partial objectivity'.

Researching the online participants' reception on the glam-writers' blogs

I started to notice the glam-writers' blogs in early 2007 when I was just about to refine my research fields. In fact, the phenomenon of establishing elite blogs on the Sina website¹⁰⁸ has prevailed not only among glam-writers, but also among celebrities more generally since 2005. While empirical studies of literary reception are often conducted within physical world settings, i.e. the offline world in which literary critics, publishers and booksellers, the media, and reading communities constitute the main communities of inquiry and research subjects (Pearce 1997; Radway 1984), the reception of literary texts on the internet remains under-explored, particularly in China. I initially hesitated to include researching the glam-writers' blogs. The reason was simple: I found it time-consuming and difficult to research the readers' reactions and behaviours on the internet, as ethnographical study of the internet requires not only observation of what happens on the internet, but more importantly a considerable amount of time, energy and active engagement with the online interactions (Kendall 1999).

When I embarked on observing the interactions on the glam-writers' blogs, however, my hesitation was gone immediately. I found this process challenging and intriguing. I observed that fans of the glam-writers seemed to use the blogs regularly as a tool for communication and ways of responding to the writers and their texts. Given the geographical size of China, the internet is actually one of the most effective and efficient ways to exchange information and engage in discussions. Online readers tended to engage with the glam-writers and the texts produced and consumed on the blogs in a more active way over a longer period of time than the women readers I interviewed who mostly engaged with the printed texts for a more limited period of

¹⁰⁸ See <http://blog.sina.com.cn/>.

time. As blog authors and literary celebrities, the glam-writers used their blogs as a tool for self-promotion. Thus I wanted to explore what was actually produced, discussed and consumed on the writers' blogs (the content of the writers' blogs), the ways in which the readers and the writers used the blogs (the functions of the blogs), the extent to which the blog performed as a platform for literary reception, and what kind of interactions took place on the blogs with respect to the relationship between the writers, texts and readers.

There is a vast literature on the methodological and ethical issues of doing research on the internet (Hine 2000, 2005; Holmes 1997; Jones 1999; Mann and Stewart 2000; Markham 1998; Rheingold 1991, 1993; Silver and Massanari 2006; Turkle 1995). I was particularly interested in and informed by Hine's ethnographic approach to researching the internet. Hine suggests two ways of viewing the internet: as both a culture – 'a place, cyberspace, where culture is formed and reformed' (Hine, 2000: 9), and cultural artefact – a technology and 'a discursively created object' (ibid: 28). In my analysis (see Chapter 6) I dealt with the blogs both as cultural artefacts (by describing what they looked like and what their content and functions were) and as a culture (by discussing why and how the readers and writers used the websites). By drawing on Hine's conceptualization of researching the internet, I was able to observe more effectively what happened on the blogs. In the following section I shall describe the process and the ways in which I researched the writers' blogs as both culture and cultural artefacts.

When I began my internet research I decided not to expose my identity as a researcher to the blog participants. I did this for two reasons: first, I observed that almost all the blog participants interacted with the writers anonymously. They tended to use obvious pseudonyms, for example. Their identities in the physical world were not accessible (certainly to me). In order to be 'one of them', I did not disclose my identity and tried to engage with the blog interactions in the same way as the participants. By participating in the online interactions while observing the

participants, I avoided the act of 'lurking' as a 'distant' researcher and putting myself in an alienated and 'powerful' position (Bell, 2001: 198). Second, I thought that an indication of my identity as a researcher might have an effect upon the online performances and activities of the participants, as they might not expect their online interactions to be monitored in a formal way. As Bell puts it: 'participation in any social setting transforms it – even if we do declare our intentions, our presence impacts on the behaviour of those around us' (ibid: 199).

Nonetheless, I did inform all the five glam-writers whose blogs I researched, about my intention of observing their personal websites. As the owners of personal properties (here the blogs are considered as both virtual belongings of the writers when viewed as part of internet culture, and actual possessions when viewed as cultural artefacts because blogs are made of original texts and images produced by the writers), I thought that the writers should be informed and make their own decision as to whether to give permission to or refuse my request of observation. I used an option which appeared on the first page of each blog site that allowed me to leave personal messages to the author. Only the author and I could read and reply to that message. In the message I briefly explained the aim and nature of my research to all the writers. However, only one of the five, Zhao Bo, responded to my message and replied in both professional and personal ways.¹⁰⁹ The other four writers ignored me in the same way that, as I found out, they did most participants.

Participant observation of the blog participants raises ethical questions such as issues of informed consent, 'privacy' and 'the public and the private' in the domain of cyberspace (Mann and Stewart 2000; Poster 1995). In my conduct of blog research, I was aware of the problematic issues of covert research and considered possible ways of compensation for the participants. I found that participants were to a certain

¹⁰⁹ I left several messages on Zhao Bo's blog, varying from general greetings to specific enquiries, e.g. 'Where do you live now?' or 'How do I buy your books?' Zhao Bo replied to one of my messages on her blog regarding the payment of books and the clarification of my delivery address in China. I was born in the same city as Zhao Bo. During my fieldwork in China in 2008, she sent me text messages via mobile and invited me out for a drink. I could not meet her, however, due to other commitments.

extent empowered by engaging with the glam-writers' blogs. For instance, they selectively read texts produced on the writers' blogs; interpreted them in the way they wanted to and 'gain[ed] only the meaning that [fit] with their everyday experiences' (Mitra and Cohen, in Jones 1999: 187). They responded to the writers regarding the topics they themselves were interested in, and constructed narratives based on their personal experiences as they revealed them on the blogs. They were not *passive recipients* of media messages, but took up an active role in the sense that they did not only decode the text, but also endowed it with new meanings based on their offline socio-cultural contexts, real-life experiences, and situated knowledges. One obvious example is that many participants shared their personal stories in the Message sections on the glam-writers' blogs. Here the role of the reader was shifted from receiving information – which is provided by the writer - to sending it back to the writer. The participants were not only consumers of blog texts, but also producers of new texts (I shall discuss this in Chapter 6). I therefore decided to leave the site of interaction undisturbed without getting informed consent from the participants. I was careful about the content of the participants' disclosures and am using the material obtained from the blogs for research purposes only.

I spent two two-month periods observing and engaging with the blog participants on these writers' blogs in the summer of 2007 and 2009. During these two years, I visited the five glam-writers' blogs regularly to keep myself updated on the writers' new posts and readers' reactions to them. Due to the 'multi-sited', 'multi-layered' and complex nature of doing research in cyberspace (Zhou, 2005: 781), it is impossible for me to explore every aspect of these blogs and all the interactions taking place there. In this thesis I primarily deploy my observation in three ways. First, by outlining the structure and content of the glam-writers' blogs, I present a picture of how the writers constructed their blogs. Second, since most readers commented on the writers' works and blog texts in the Comment section, I delineate the way in which readers made their responses to the writers, their works or the texts produced on the blogs. Third, I examine one of the most interactive sections on the blogs, the

Message section, in which author-reader interactions took place. By using the first person in the writing, I was conscious of my own role in the research as 'a positioned subject' (Campbell, 2009: 126) and that my observation of the glam-writers' blog phenomenon was based on my own positionalities and limited time and experience of surfing on the internet and engaging with the blog participants. In this sense my writing represents 'only a fragment of life in cyberspace' (Markham, 1998: 18).

In order to better interact with my research subjects, including both the glam-writers and their fans on the blogs, I registered as a Sina user and established my own blog on the Sina site in March 2007. Becoming an insider among thousands of Sina blog users rather than 'a detached analyst', I hoped to gain 'a reflexive understanding' not only of the medium, but also the social interactions taking place in this particular sphere (Hine, 2000: 23). By doing this I was able to make comments on the posts, leave messages to both the glam-writers and blog participants, add the hyperlinks of the glam-writers' blogs to my blog, and observe and participate in discussions. It also facilitated my access to these blog sites, because whenever I wanted to visit these writers' blogs I only needed to log on to my own blog and click the hyperlinks which directed me automatically to the writers' websites I wanted to visit.

In observing the writers' blogs, I found offline social contexts of particular importance to the interpretation of online communication and interaction. Internet researchers who take ethnographic approaches to studying online interaction emphasize the importance of combining the online observation of participants and offline face-to-face interactions with them (Baym 1995; Hine 2000; Orgad 2005; Turkle 1995). Hine sees this extending relationship of researcher and informants from online to offline as 'a way of contextualizing and adding authenticity to the findings obtained online' (Hine, 2000: 48). Kendall emphasizes the impact of offline social contexts on the participants' online behaviour. As he puts it:

On-line interaction cannot be divorced from the off-line social and political contexts within which participants live their daily lives. Various aspects of these

contexts enable and constrain the ability of participants, potential participants, and nonparticipants to learn about, access, and navigate on-line forums. Once on-line, participants draw on their off-line resources, as well as understandings gained in off-line experiences, to negotiate and interpret their on-line interaction (in Jones 1999: 58).

When discussing the social contexts for blog participation, I took into consideration some practical issues such as the extent of internet accessibility for Chinese readers from different geographical areas and the prevalence of blogging among the young generation of Chinese internet users after 2005. Although I did not meet any of these participants in person in the offline settings, I gained certain contextual knowledge about their online participation from articles and research statistics published on the websites such as Sina and Sohu, as to how and why the celebrities' blogs on a site such as Sina have become popular and attracted so many fans.¹¹⁰ This information helped to bring to the foreground the social and cultural context in which both the glam-writers and readers come to use blogs as a platform for communication.

Specific to the reception of the glam-writers' works as part of the content of blog interactions, I contrasted the online participants' views and behaviours with those of the offline readers I interviewed in my fieldwork (whose reception I deal with in Chapter 5), examining the extent to which factors such as age, occupation, location and personal experiences might in part contribute to individual differences in receiving the glam-writers' works. Although I did not, and had no way of accessing the personal information of the diverse readers on the blogs, I obtained details of some bloggers' personal narratives through their self-disclosure in the Message sections. I shall demonstrate how factors such as personal experiences (as described by participants on the glam-writers' blogs) influenced the readers' reception of the glam-writers' works and their online responses to the glam-writers in Chapter 6.

¹¹⁰ See <http://www.hinews.cn/news/system/2007/12/26/010183327.shtml>, and <http://www.cnii.com.cn/20060808/ca367492.htm>, accessed on 11/10/2009.

As one of the most contentious terms in the realm of cyberculture, the term 'virtual community', or 'cybercommunity', has attracted much attention from internet researchers (Baym 1995; Fernback 1999; Hine 2000; Jones 1999; Rheingold 1993). In my research of the blog participants, however, I did not find this term particularly relevant in relation to the issue of literary reception. Based on my observation of the blog interactions among participants, most of them were registered Sina users and had their own blogs on the Sina site. Some formed their own communities by joining in different circles, either following particular writers or according to their own preferences. The act of forming one's own communities or circles, *quanzi*, was facilitated by a particular Sina blog function.¹¹¹ As participants did not tend to discuss the writers' works in their circles much, I did not include these communities as part of my discussion of the writers' blogs.

One serious challenge which I encountered when researching the blogs was the unexpected deletion of one writer's, Wei Hui's, blog in 2008. All the information on the blog suddenly disappeared, including all of this writer's posts, reader comments and messages. What was left on the original site was the basic skeleton of the Sina model webpage and one of Wei Hui's portraits.¹¹² The deletion of Wei Hui's blog caused some difficulties for my research. Although I did my observation of the blogs and drafted the chapter in 2007, I always had to go back and refer to the information (quotes from the writer's posts and readers' comments) from previous entries, and observe any updates to these entries and readers' comments. The only information I could use and refer to, after the deletion of Wei Hui's blog in 2008, was what I had already got from her website in 2007. Although Wei Hui re-established her blog in June 2009, all the previous material published on that site was lost and not retrievable any longer. There is no information available regarding why the author deleted her blog, although an entry which Wei Hui posted in 2009 was a sort of

¹¹¹ The Sina blog provides a function for each user to build their circles, or communities. By clicking the 'blog circle' icon, *boke quan*, on the first page of the blog site, one is directed to the site where one can join any existing circles provided one is given permission by the circle owner, *quanzhu*. One can also set up one's own circle according to one's preference.

¹¹² See <http://blog.sina.com.cn/weihui>, accessed on 11/11/2009.

statement explaining the falsehood of a recent rumour about her identity as a spy on the internet.¹¹³

Similar problems also happened with the deletion of readers' comments and messages by the writers. For example, there were discussions about Hong Ying's personal relationship with her husband Zhao Yiheng, who is a professor teaching at a university in London. The first time I visited the site, I saw that many readers had made various comments and expressed different opinions about this in the Message section. When I re-visited her blog two days later, many of these messages had been deleted, presumably by the writer, without explanation. Compared to the printed texts on paper which could be stored and referred to at any time, I found the ephemerality (Mitra and Cohen 1999) and unpredictability of the online resources created by internet technologies such as blogs sometimes a threat, rather than a gift. This is an issue for internet researchers who rely on capturing certain temporal phenomena and have no alternative sources to back up their research when the original texts disappear. Thus any findings of internet research are '*provisional, located and contingent*' (Bell, 2001: 194, emphasis in original). As Bell states: 'research on the web is always a snapshot, from a particular time, of a limited number of sites, stitched together uniquely' (2001: 94).

In this chapter I have reviewed the different methods I adopted in my research informed by feminist notions such as 'situated knowledges' in relation to the positionings in particular. In seeking to achieve 'partial objectivity', I combined both offline and online examinations of three different reading constituencies, i.e. literary critics, women readers, and blog participants. I have also discussed the reasons for using these methods and some of the difficulties and challenges I encountered during the research process. In the following chapters, I shall analyse the reception of the glam-writers' works by the three different reading constituencies.

¹¹³ See <http://blog.sina.com.cn/weihui>, accessed on 11/11/2009.

Chapter 4: The Reception of the Chinese Glam-Writers' Works by Literary Critics

As professional readers, Chinese literary critics, periodical/journal editors and established writers take a high cultural perspective to the glam-writers' works, that is a perspective informed by traditional Chinese literary values. The reception of the glam-writers' works by mainstream literary critics is therefore determined by certain literary traditions. In researching this field I found that there were at least two ways of categorizing the critical responses to the glam-writers' works. First, they could be divided according to the different attitudes held by the Chinese literary critics and intellectuals. For instance, whereas mainstream male critics who insisted on a particular literary tradition had a negative view of these works, certain younger and marginalized literary scholars provided different readings and interpretations from different perspectives and showed their understanding and appreciation of these texts. Feminist critics such as Dai Jinhua, on the other hand, tended to analyze these texts in relation to the socio-economic and cultural contexts in which they were produced and disseminated. Second, the literary critics' reception of these works could also be divided in terms of the different issues they focused on. I found that the indigenous criticism mainly centred on three different aspects in relation to the glam-writers and their texts: the glam-writers as private individuals, the glam-writers' works as literary texts, and the emergence of these glam-writers as a socio-cultural phenomenon in the late 1990s (the reasons for sequencing the three issues in this way are discussed below).

I base my analysis of the literary criticism of the glam-writers' works here on the latter concerns. It is worth noting that indigenous literary criticism of contemporary Chinese women's writing has moved from a purely textual analysis to a number of approaches within disciplines such as (cross)cultural studies (Xi 2003), literary studies (history and sociology of literature) (Chen 2007; Xie 2007), and more recently and

predominantly, within the field of gender and women's studies - feminist literary criticism in particular (Luo 2004; Xi 2003; Zhang 1992). In this chapter I take a closer look at this domestic literary criticism of the glam-writers' works. I shall first examine texts that focus on the glam-writers as *people* (women), as this is one of the most prominent modes employed by mainstream male critics in mainland China. Then I shall investigate the critiques of the glam-writers' works as *texts*, exploring the ways in which different readings and understandings are provided by literary critics and scholars and offer possible reasons for these different interpretations. Here my focus of the criticism changes from the author to the text. Among different attempts at classifying the glam-writers' works by literary scholars, I focus in particular on critiques based on two specific issues, i.e. the notion of urban literature and its connection with consumer culture, and the increasing sense of the marginalization of high literature or serious literature (*chun wenxue*), brought about by China's participation in the global economy and by the marketization of Chinese literature in the 1990s. Finally, as literary critics of a younger generation and some feminist critics tend to view the glam-writers' works from a contextual perspective, I shall discuss the responses to the glam-writers' emergence as a socio-cultural *phenomenon* accompanying China's ongoing process of modernization and commercialization, as well as the social and cultural causes for, and contexts of, the emergence of this particular type of women's writing.

Before entering into the textual analysis of the critical reception of the glam-writers' works, I would like to recall a short history of contemporary Chinese literature since the New Era (1978 -), known as the New Era literature¹¹⁴ for reasons discussed below. A brief history of the development of Chinese women's literature has already been outlined in the Introduction to this thesis. The reason why I emphasize the literature that emerged in the New Era written by the Chinese women writers in

¹¹⁴ The term New Era refers to the period when the reform and opening up policy was launched in China, especially after the third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in December 1978. New Era literature refers to literature produced to redress the leftist focus before or during the Cultural Revolution after 1978.

particular here again, is that mainstream literary critics and editors such as Wei Xinhong (dates unknown)¹¹⁵ regarded post-70s writing as having achieved 'enormous social progress' in the sense that the post-70s writers produced a distinct kind of discourse by virtue of a 'lack of Cultural Revolution memories' that might influence their works.¹¹⁶ This is different from the New Era literature produced by the older generations during the 1980s, namely scar literature (shanghen wenxue), introspection literature (fansi wenxue), revolution literature (gaige wenxue), and root-seeking literature (xungen wenxue).¹¹⁷ As a socio-cultural product which partly responded to the social realities under a new regime, New Era literature emerged not only to reflect the social circumstances and historical conditions of that particular era, but it also and therefore opened up new spaces for post-70s writing.

There is a tradition in Chinese culture of thinking about writers in terms of generation, dai. Thus the post-70s glam-writers are also labeled the 'late-born generation' (wansheng dai) and are differentiated from the 'new-born generation' (xinsheng dai), which often refers to the post-60s writers. Dai Jinhua argues:

I think it is not the critics' intention to use 'generation' to discuss Chinese literature, but it is a very particular cultural reality in China. In fact, this sort of reality has confused me all the time. The reason for this confusion is underlined by a question I want to ask: why is the art and scholarly life of Chinese intellectuals working in arts and humanities faculties so transient, as though it is very difficult for us to cross the boundaries of generations...I think that every generation is born with a particular history, and all the experience it has is the personal one that history has given to it. To put it another way, one's personal experience can by no means be separated from one's historical experience (Dai Jinhua, 1999: 76-7, my translation).

¹¹⁵ Wei Xinhong, chief editor of the Shanghai based periodical *The Novel Circles* (Xiaoshuo jie) and vice-chief editor in Shanghai Art and Literature Press (Shanghai wenyi chubanshe), established the post-70s column and was regarded as the godfather of the post-70s glam-writers. See <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2004-08-03/18023916338.shtml>, accessed on 3/11/2008.

¹¹⁶ See <http://qzs2.tougao.com/xinshige/list.asp?id=1234>, accessed on 1/11/2008.

¹¹⁷ See <http://qzs2.tougao.com/xinshige/list.asp?id=1234>, accessed on 1/11/2008.

While post-60s autobiographical/semi-autobiographical women writers such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai, and their innovative form of expression - individualized writing characterized by the exploration of the female body and ambivalent attitudes towards sex and relationships between the sexes or between women - have been at the centre of critical interventions for discussing the female body and gender experiences, a heightened preoccupation with sex and desire by the post-70s glam-writers such as Wei Hui and Mian Mian was noticed by certain male critics and editors who invested in the packaging and marketization of these women writers in what might be regarded as an exploitative manner. This is, in fact, also recognized by publishers and booksellers as a sales point of these glam-writers' novels.

The post-70s glam-writers' works focus on the experiences and feelings of women inhabiting the metropolis, most of which do not and can never represent the majority of women living in less economically advanced cities, not to mention those in the rural areas. Their experiences in urban cities do, however, reflect a particular existence of certain young Chinese women, which are quite different from those of the women living in the rural parts of China. As Dai Jinhua points out, Chinese society stepped into 'an overall commercialization' in the 1990s (1999: 73). In the current literary and cultural field, the glam-writers' way of writing and expression caters to the taste of a large number of readers in urban China, indicated by the massive sale of paperbacks of these writers' novels, as a certain Chinese readership is 'sick of revolutionary and historical allegories' (Zhang Xiaohong, 2003: 32).

Not until 2000 when *Shanghai Baby* was banned in mainland China, did the post-70s writers' works enter critical reception and flood the literary market as well as the internet. *Shanghai Baby* and another novel *Candy* by Mian Mian are the most representative examples of how the post-70s glam-writers launched their debut in China at the turn of the twenty-first century. Social taboos under the Communist party's ideology such as drug taking, sexual intercourse, prostitution, masturbation, and homosexual relationships, are frequently portrayed in these novels. Both novels

were deemed 'distasteful, immoral, and harmful' by critics and censored for their portrayal of female sexuality and of women as 'sexual, young, beautiful, amoral, rebellious, and anti-intellectual' (Lu, 2008: 168-9).

As one of the most contentious and representative works among the post-70s writings, *Shanghai Baby* has attracted at least two ways of reading it. One suggests that *Shanghai Baby* is a superficial mimicry of western literature describing an unattainable aspiration to a bourgeois and decadent lifestyle. This reading insists that quotations from foreign authors and artists such as Henry Miller, Allen Ginsberg, Milan Kundera, Bob Dylan, Virginia Woolf, and Marguerite Duras 'are being dealt with on a superficial level and ask for little interpretative effort' (Zhang Xiaohong, 2003: 32). They 'read no different than foreign brands like IKEA, Esprit, Calvin Klein, Christian Dior, and Chanel' (ibid). It is part of the critique of contemporary indigenous culture that it is influenced by mainstream western consumer culture. Another view of this novel sees the author Wei Hui as the spokeswoman of Chinese women's liberation, as she expressed what she wanted to. The heroine Coco offers the reader an image of a modern Chinese woman who breaks male-centred social traditions and moral rules, being instead true to her own feelings and desires. *Shanghai Baby* thus offers its readers a different way of writing and thinking from traditional Chinese women's narratives. Therein lies its importance. However, repeated references to foreign masterpieces and authors in the text, the representation of a deliberate imitation of western bourgeois lifestyles, a certain linguistic - by Chinese high cultural standards - simplicity in the narrative, and a repetition of sex depictions lead to this novel being viewed as vulgar and 'light' literature.

Chinese mainstream critics regarded the year 2001 as a watershed which symbolized the displacement of the post-70s writers from a marginalized position to a central one.¹¹⁸ For instance, searching on the internet after 2001, there have been

¹¹⁸ See <http://www.studa.net/wenhuayanjiu/080815/11360214.html>, accessed on 14/08/2008.

thousands of entries for the post-70s writers. Among male Chinese literary intellectuals, literary critics such as Zhang Ning¹¹⁹ and Zhu Dake¹²⁰ hold a negative, if not derogatory, attitude towards the post-70s writers' works in the sense that they view these works as sharing too much with mass/popular culture or as breaking with Chinese literary traditions. However, critics such as Li Jingze¹²¹ and Xie Youshun¹²² show their tolerance and understanding of these texts from a perspective that contemporary Chinese women's writing has changed, influenced by and expressive of the commercialization and globalization that Chinese society has been experiencing, both economically and culturally, since the 1990s (as I shall discuss below). The glam-writers' writing is therefore in part viewed as a response to, and an effect of, China's ongoing process of modernization and marketization.

It is worth mentioning that the title 'post-70s' (70 hou), which was first invented to represent a group of writers born in the 1970s, attracted more attention within Chinese literary circles than the name of any single writer did. In the mid-1990s, there was a battle about this title between editors of periodicals and magazines, and Changzhou-born writer Chen Wei, founder of the literary periodical *Dark Blue* (Heilan, 黑蓝). Chen Wei argued that he first proposed the concept of the 'post-70s' and initiated publishing works of several born-in-the-1970s writers in *Dark Blue* in August 1995.¹²³ However, the publication was closed down for unknown reasons in May 1996, which partly contributed to the establishment of the 'post-70s' column by Wei

¹¹⁹ Zhang Ning (b. 1958) writer, visiting researcher in the Department of Cultural Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, and professor in the Department of Literature, Journalism and Communication at China Nation University. He lives in Beijing now and his published works include *Wisdom in Narrative* (Xushi de zhihui, 1997) and *Verbalism Without Utopia* (Meiyou wutuobang de yanci, 2005). See <http://book.sina.com.cn/people/zhangning/>, and http://www.gmw.cn/content/2005-08/18/content_290668.htm, accessed on 1/11/2008.

¹²⁰ Zhu Dake (b. 1957), born in Shanghai, literary critic and essayist, Professor, Director at the graduate school of Culture and Criticism at Tongji University. He published works such as *Noisy Era* (Guozao de shidai, 1998) and *Maze Of Burning* (Ranshao de mijin, 1991)

¹²¹ Li Jingze (b. 1964), born in Shanxi province, critic, senior editor, has written literary criticism as well as prose and essays since the 1990s. His published works include *The Name of the Colour* (Yanse de mingzi, 2000), and 'Way Back to the Country' (Tongwang guxiang de daolu) in *The Southern Cultural Forum* (1999): 3. See <http://book.sina.com.cn/people/lijingze/>, accessed on 3/11/2008.

¹²² Xie Youshun (b. 1972), born in Fujian province, writer, worked as associate director for the *Southern City Newspaper* since 1998, and then professor in Chinese Literature at the Sun Yat-Sen University since 2006. His published works include *Conflicts in Our Hearts* (Women neixin de chongtu, 2000), and *We Are Not Alone* (Women bingbu gudan, 2001). See <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/zjzl/zjk/xys/>, accessed on 3/11/2008.

¹²³ See http://article.hongxiu.com/a/2004-6-1/385488_3.shtml, accessed on 1/11/2008.

Xinhong in the Shanghai-based periodical *The Novel Circles* (Xiaoshuo jie, 小说界) in 1996.¹²⁴ The title 'post-70s' was further promoted by large provincial literary periodicals such as *Mountain Flowers* (Shanhua, 山花) and *Writers* (Zuojia, 作家). Since the mid-1990s, writers who were born between 1970 and 1979 have been regarded as the post-70s, and the post-70s women writers have been labelled as beauty writers (meinü zuojia) and fashionable women writers (shishang nüzuojia). Not until 1999 was the column 'Reconstructing the Post-70s' (Chongsu 70hou) re-established by *Lotuses* (Furong, 芙蓉 – another literary periodical, not to be confused with one of Ann Baby's novels *The Lotus*), aimed to redress the fallacy that post-70s writers are equivalent to beauty writers.¹²⁵ Chen Wei saw this as an impulse for him to reveal the original story of the establishment of the 'post-70s' against Wei Xinhong after several years' silence. This battle over who had coined the concept of 'post-70s' focused attention on the emergence of the post-70s glam-writers and resulted in heated debates around this group.

This leads to the issue I want to raise here, regarding the logic behind the notion that the post-70s glam-writers' debut was a plot by major literary periodical editors. Critic and chief editor of *The Writers* Zong Renfa¹²⁶ pointed out that the concept of the post-70s was not from a manifesto by individual writers or this group, but was imposed from the 'outside'.¹²⁷ This 'outside' can be traced back to the establishment of the post-70s column by Wei Xinhong in *The Novel Circles* in 1996, as well as the original act of launching the post-70s by the three male editors Li Jingze, Shi Zhanjun¹²⁸ and Zong Renfa. The concept was used as a way of stimulating a

¹²⁴ *The Novel Circles* is one of the largest literary periodicals, which was established in May 1981 and founded by the Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House. It is published every two months.

¹²⁵ See <http://www.studa.net/wenhuayanjiu/080815/11360214.html>, accessed on 7/10/2008.

¹²⁶ Zong Renfa (b. 1960), born in Jilin province, chief editor of *Writer* magazine, published *Kitchen* (Chu Fang) and collection of reviews *The Gallipot, Street Lamp, and Monument* (Taoguan, ludeng, jinianbei). For further information, see <http://www.1-123.com/dictionary/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=9608>, accessed on 4/11/2008.

¹²⁷ See *Southland City Newspaper* on December 17, 2007.

¹²⁸ Shi Zhanjun (b. 1966), born in Jilin province, professor, researcher in the Post-doctorate Flowing Station (boshihou liudong zhan) in the Department of Chinese Literature at Beijing University, published over 400 papers and essays in magazines such as *Literature and Art Studies* (wenyi yanjiu, 文艺研究), *Contemporary Writers Review* (dangdai zuojia pinglun, 当代作家评论), and *Southern Cultural Forum* (nanfang wentan, 南方文坛). See http://www.ycwb.com/ycwb/2007-11/30/content_1704775.htm,

response to these writers in the media. Li Jingze used the phrase 'desultory, furious, in an exciting and plotting atmosphere' to describe the editors' action in recalling the talk among the three in a Beijing restaurant in the winter of 1997. I quote parts from their reported dialogue in order to illustrate how they set up the post-70s as a group phenomenon:

Shi Zhanjun: It is redundant and perhaps paradoxical to identify the born-in-the-1970s writers' writing as an independent category, similar to categorizing the evolutionary history of literature in terms of the 'nineteenth century' and the 'twentieth century'. This may arouse historians' scorn or the outrage of present literary followers.

Li Jingze: I see a certain excuse in Zhanjun's words. He must have thought of the criticism and censure centred on the 'born-in-the-1970s'. Proposing 'born-in-the-1970s' no doubt lacks deliberation and precision, but is convenient. As Zhanjun said, [we] do not plan to write them into literary history. So if the proposal of the post-70s is denied, I do not mind. This group of writers will not hereby vanish (Zong Renfa et al 1998, my translation).

The male editors' explanation of their act of launching the post-70s further complicates the emergence of the born-in-the-1970s glam-writers as a group. As a new and unfamiliar gendered phenomenon within contemporary Chinese literary circles, the post-70s writing appeared as a crisis and threat to Chinese elite culture, particularly to mainstream literary critics who insist on a patriarchal literary tradition and are prejudiced against writers whose work does not conform to this. One form of prejudice is categorizing these writers into groups, the so-called 'beauty writers' and 'post-70s writers' for instance. This way of labeling and categorizing people, to some extent, is a way of limiting or pigeonholing the women writers and their literary creativity.

In an interview with the *Southern Personality Weekly* (Nanfang renwu zhoukan), Zhu Dake states that:

Literary criticism has grown up from its misunderstanding. Literary criticism does not merely say 'no', nor does it explain a certain literary phenomenon (person).

Literary criticism articulates a judgement of literary phenomena by means of the media. Critics are one of the crucial forces in the development of literature.

[However,] there is a severe division among Chinese literary critics at present.

One consists of persons who make cruel criticism (*kuping*), the other are those who offer praise. The two constitute opposing sides. This is morbid, as it reveals an inefficiency of a majority of critics... However, literary criticism is

individualized. So-called objectiveness is nothing but a utopian idea. My critique is never objective, nor does it represent any social group.¹²⁹ (my translation)

Where literary criticism traditionally concerned itself with the text alone, in relation to this group of writers it began to extend beyond the text to their persons, that is to them as individuals and their lifestyles. Certain literary critics such as Li Jingze and Dai Jinhua view the emergence of these glam-writers as a literary and cultural phenomenon, analyzing the common characteristics these writers share in their works. Thus this group of writers who emerged when they were relatively young is also viewed as a collective writing community rather than individuals with distinguishable writing styles and strategies. In the following section, I shall analyse three different types of reception by Chinese mainstream critics, including criticism of these women *writers*, of these writers' *works* (text), and of the very *phenomenon* of the glam-writers or so-called 'beauty writers'.

The Criticism of the Glam-Writers as Private Individuals

As in all cultures, writers are frequently the objects of attack from literary critics and censors. Henry Miller, Wei Hui's 'spiritual father' (Wei Hui, 1999: 10), whom Kate Millett considers in her book *Sexual Politics* (1969) as 'one of the most important influences on our contemporary writing', was also dismissed as 'beneath scholarly attention' (Millett, rpt. 2000: 295). His autobiographical novel *Tropic Of Cancer* (1934)

¹²⁹ See <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2005-01-26/17515677844.shtml>, accessed on 4/11/2008.

was banned in English-speaking countries and first published in France. In 1961 the novel was finally officially published in the U.S., and then in the UK two years later. In a similar fashion, Jia Pingwa was the first person who explicitly wrote about sex after the Cultural Revolution. His previously banned novel *The Abandoned Capital* (Feidu, 1993) shocked literary circles in the early 1990s and was condemned as decadent and detrimental to young readers. Only in 2009 was a revised version of the novel allowed to be published in mainland China.¹³⁰ Not until Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's novels became notorious for their explicit depictions of sex in the late 1990s, was Jia Pingwa's *The Abandoned Capital* re-evaluated by official criticism. Thus the attack on writers as persons is not specific to women writers, as my example shows, but happens to male writers, too, and is often associated with divergent styles of writing and depictions of taboo topics.

Male literary critics such as Zhu Dake and Zhu Qi¹³¹ have attacked the glam-writers as people. This is reflected in the ways in which they read their texts and see women's participation in literary production. Their critiques of Wei Hui and Mian Mian are mainly based on their prejudice against these writers' personality and personal life (as I shall discuss below). A radical example of such derogatory attitudes towards the glam-writers and their works is *A Book of Criticism of Ten Beauty Writers* (Shi meinü zuojia pipanshu, 2005)¹³² by a free lancer with the *nom de plume* Ta'ai (He Love).¹³³ Not only are the post-70s glam-writers such as Ann Baby, Mian Mian, Mu

¹³⁰ See <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/news/2009/07-29/1794665.shtml>, accessed on 12/11/2009.

¹³¹ Zhu Qi (b. 1966), born in Shanghai, avant-garde artist, art critic and exhibition planner. He has planned and participated various shows and exhibitions in Shanghai since 1996.

¹³² For further information on the book, see <http://book.sina.com.cn/nzt/ele/meinvpiper/>, <http://www.lxb.cn/books/16/169010.html>, and <http://taai.bokee.com/viewdiary.41113454.html>, accessed on 29/09/2008. This is not a full version of the book. Hard copies of this book are available at book stores such as Amazon and Joyo, and higher institutions such as the China University of Politics and Law, University of Neimenggu, and Shanghai Maritime University. The ten beauty writers discussed in this book are Wei Hui, Mian Mian, Ann Baby, Hong Ying, Jiu Dan, Chun Shu, Sheng Keyi, Yin Lichuan, Zhao Ning, and Mu Zimei. The first four are the writers whose work I discuss here. Among the five women writers whom I studied, Zhao Bo is the only writer whose name is not listed in this book.

¹³³ Ta'ai (b. 1981), whose real name is Han Weibing, born in Gansu province, graduated from the University of Jilin in 2004. He has a column in the *University Weekly*. His published works include 'The Post-80s' Movement of Making Evil' (Bashihou de zaoyaoyundong, 2004), and 'I Fall in Love, Does It Matter to You?' (Wo lian'ai, ni guandezhao ma, 2004). For further information on the writer, see <http://taai.bokee.com/1409200.html>, accessed on 29/09/2008.

Zimei,¹³⁴ Sheng Keyi,¹³⁵ Wei Hui, and Yin Lichuan¹³⁶ the objects of critique, but so are the post-60s women writers such as Hong Ying, Jiu Dan,¹³⁷ Zhao Ning,¹³⁸ and the post-80s Chun Shu¹³⁹. Ta'ai inveighed against these ten women writers in an acid and ironic tone:

Beauty writers are wont to advertise their bodies and endeavour to exploit the body. Thus to have persistent financial gain is their true pursuit, while literature becomes a means of becoming famous overnight and getting rich for life. The literary field becomes their racecourse for hunting. At the cost of their limited sense of honour, they bet with their bodies in the name of literature... The only thing they [beauty writers] need to do is to expose themselves, uncovering their superficiality and illiteracy in the form of their bodies. To some extent, an aggressive beauty writer does not need to observe and experience life or social conditions, but merely look into the mirror in a poky bathroom. The only way to reflect life is to explore her body shamelessly.¹⁴⁰ (my translation)

Although Ta'ai states clearly in the first chapter of his book that his review is literary criticism, rather than a critique of individuals, vicious attacks on *both* the women

¹³⁴ Mu Zimei (b. 1978), whose real name is Li Li, graduated in the Department of Philosophy of Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangdong. She is a free-lancer and column editor, who became famous immediately after disclosing her personal sex diaries and pornographic photos on her blog. She published her book *Omitted Love Letters* (Yiqing Shu, 2003) based on her sex diaries. See <http://news.sina.com.cn/z/mzmrfb/> and <http://news.tom.com/hot/muzimei/>, accessed on 26/10/2008.

¹³⁵ Sheng Keyi (b. 1973), born in Hunan province, began to publish novels in 2002. Her most famous novels are *Water and Milk* (Shuiru, 2002), and *Girl From the North* (Beimei, 2004). See <http://www.hongxiu.com/grzl/index.asp?zz=%CA%A2%BF%C9%D2%D4>, accessed on 26/10/2008.

¹³⁶ Yin Lichuan (b. 1973), born in Chongqing, freelancer and poet, graduated from the University of Beijing and ESEC Film School in France. Her published works include the poem *A Little Bit More Comfortable* (Zai shufu yixie, 2001) and novel *A Humble Person* (Jianren, 2002). She is also the director of the films *The Park* (2006) and *Cowboy and Vega* (2008) which are based on her novels. See <http://www.wenxue2000.com/poet/ylc.htm> and <http://women.sohu.com/s2008/yinlichuan/>, accessed on 26/10/2008.

¹³⁷ Jiu Dan (b. 1968), whose real name is Zhu Ziping, born in Jiangsu province. She went to pursue her higher education in 1995 in Singapore and returned to China in 2000. She is famous for her novel *Crows* which made her writing notoriously known as prostitute literature. Her published novels include *Love and Death* (Aishang, 1996), *Women's Bed* (Nürenchuang, 1999), *Crows* (Wuya, 2001), *Singapore Lover* (Xiniapo qingren, 2002) and *Phoenix* (Fenghuang, 2003). See <http://woman.zaobao.com/pages2/wuya200702.html> and <http://woman.zaobao.com/pages1/wuya250601.html>, accessed on 26/10/2008.

¹³⁸ Zhao Ning (b. 1963), born in Beijing, contracted writer in the Beijing Writer's Association. She became famous for 'breast writing' after publishing seven of her novels in 2001, including *Cold Lips* (Lengchun, 2001), *Rouge Empire* (Yanzhi diguo, 2003) and *Night Makeup* (Yezhuang, 2004). These are collectively known as 'Zhao Ning Cyclone'. See <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/CU-c/602870.htm> and <http://book.qq.com/a/20080225/000028.htm>, accessed on 26/10/2008.

¹³⁹ Chun Shu (b. 1983), born in Beijing, poet, representative figure of the post-80s writers. She became famous for her novel *Beijing Doll* (Beijing Wawa, 2004). See http://book.sina.com.cn/nzt/1091518683_beidouxing/index.shtml, accessed on 26/10/2008.

¹⁴⁰ See <http://book.sina.com.cn/longbook/ele/meinvpipan/1.shtml>, accessed on 20/10/2008.

writers and their works dominate the whole book. This assault provoked different responses from the glam-writers. Post-70s writers such as Ann Baby and Yin Lichuan responded to the book with scorn. In answering Ta'ai's criticism of her work as 'narcissism and isolation, with narrow and shallow thinking, merely immediate emotions and feelings',¹⁴¹ Ann Baby said that this was just one of many critiques both on the internet and outside of it. She did not see the need to argue about whether she was a beauty writer or not.¹⁴² In contrast, post-60s writer Hong Ying expressed her outrage towards Ta'ai, asserting that Ta'ai was not critiquing, but rather inveighing against, these writers:

First of all, I am not a so-called beauty writer. And because of our different ways of writing, I should not be confused with Wei Hui, Mian Mian, Mu Zimei, or anyone else. If [he] really wants to criticize me, I suggest that he should read my novels first, starting from an analysis of the textual meaning rather than his self-righteous abreaction of emotions and making irresponsible remarks.¹⁴³ (my translation)

Hong Ying condemned this criticism as a personal assault and another way of attracting readers' attention, whereas post-80s writer Chun Shu responded to this book in a tolerant way by stating that Ta'ai used to be her rival on the internet in the past, but had become one of her friends now, and that she did not mind as he (Ta'ai) always behaved that way.¹⁴⁴

Ta'ai's book received critical attention from established critics and writers too. The critic Bai Ye¹⁴⁵ for example stated:

It (the book) is not professional literary criticism, it should belong to the category of cruel criticism (kuping), as it embodies a great deal of emotional abreaction. [It]

¹⁴¹ See <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/4917793/>, accessed on 12/09/2008.

¹⁴² See <http://www.tianya.cn/new/publicforum/Content.asp?strItem=no06&flag=1&idArticle=23511>, accessed on 20/10/2008.

¹⁴³ See <http://book.qq.com/a/20050426/000072.htm>, accessed on 20/10/2008.

¹⁴⁴ See <http://book.qq.com/a/20050426/000072.htm>, or *Jinghua Times* 京华时报 on April 26, 2005.

¹⁴⁵ Bai Ye (b. 1952), born in Shanxi province, famous literary critic, professor, researcher at the Research Centre for Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). See <http://book.sina.com.cn/people/baiye/>, accessed on 5/11/2008.

speaks of something that professional critics want to say but consider a discomfort or disdain to articulate.¹⁴⁶ (my translation)

Although Bai Ye does not clarify what exactly 'something' refers to, he points out that the key flaw of this book is that the author fails to differentiate between criticism of the writers and that of their works, offering a personal attack rather than critiquing the texts as such. Zhang Yiwu agrees with this point but argues that as public personalities, writers must accept criticism from every aspect, even if it is *ad hominem*. But critics should not infringe the right to privacy and the honour of the writer while critiquing.¹⁴⁷

Not only did this book provoke various debates among the major critics and beauty writers, it also attracted much attention from the press when it was published in May 2005.¹⁴⁸ In the later part of this chapter I shall discuss this in relation to the influence of the media on the literary criticism of the glam-writers' works. Other voices directly against the glam-writers include Zhu Qi, who regarded himself as Mian Mian's first teacher in literature and critiqued her for promoting herself as a 'professional planner'.¹⁴⁹ That self-promotion in his view took three forms: her 'office effect', referring to Mian Mian's deliberate dressing-up and showing-off in the male editors' office; her 'social intercommunication', signifying Mian Mian's active acquaintance with literati and sharing her own stories with others and the public; and her 'Shanghai effect', promoting Shanghai as a symbol of urban culture which differentiates it from other cities and attracts particular favours from literati. Apart from the three techniques to which Mian Mian soon responded,¹⁵⁰ Zhu Qi also attacked male writers such as Han Dong¹⁵¹ and Ge Hongbing¹⁵² who praised Mian Mian and her works as

¹⁴⁶ See <http://www.tianya.cn/new/publicforum/Content.asp?strItem=no06&flag=1&idArticle=23511>, accessed on 29/09/2008.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ See <http://www.tianya.cn/new/publicforum/Content.asp?strItem=no06&flag=1&idArticle=23511>, accessed on 22/10/2008.

¹⁴⁹ See <http://edu.sina.com.cn/job/2000-05-07/2614.shtml>, accessed on 2/1/2009.

¹⁵⁰ See <http://edu.sina.com.cn/critique/2000-05-09/2664.shtml>, accessed on 2/1/2009.

¹⁵¹ Han Dong (1961-), poet, novelist. His published novels include *My Plato* (Wo de bolatu, 2000) and *Our Bodies* (Women de shenti, 1996).

¹⁵² Ge Hongbing (1968-), writer, critic, and Professor in Chinese Literature at Shanghai University. His published works include *My N Kinds of Life* (Wo de n zhong shenghuo, 2003) and *Sand Bed*

'representative of the 1990's literary world'.¹⁵³ According to Zhu Qi, any adoration of Mian Mian is a 'manifestation of traditional Chinese elites' personal desire'.¹⁵⁴ Thus Zhu Qi sees Mian Mian's effort at self-promotion and certain male scholars' appreciation of Mian Mian's works as shaming for Chinese elite culture. He portrays any support for Mian Mian as self-seeking and detracting from the proper Chinese literary traditions.

In an interview with the *Southern Personality Weekly*, critic Zhu Dake used the word 'profit metathesis' (liyi zhihuan) to indicate a tacit rule prevalent among many critics:

In the domain of criticism, there is a great deal of hidden profit metathesis. As long as you give praise, you can get various kinds of benefits and become mainstream and core. Therefore, making speeches and presenting opinions skillfully becomes the survival secret of most critics.¹⁵⁵ (my translation)

Although this disposition does not apply to Ta'ai and Zhu Qi, both of whom attacked the glam-writers rather than praising them and their works, in the context of the 'profit metathesis' which indicates a utilitarian motive underlying literary criticism, a shift in the object and focus of criticism from text to author and the author's personal attributes is evident. Whatever purposes or intentions are behind the emergence of the personalized criticism of the glam-writers, this mode ignores the traditional concern of literary criticism in mainland China which is the focus on the text and text-related factors and effects, rather than on the producers of the text as private individuals.

In refuting the mainstream critics who did not recognize the post-70s writers, Li Jingze expressed his disdain of certain criticisms made by those 'who exercise their power over the less powerful groups such as young writers'.¹⁵⁶ On the one hand,

(Shachuang, 2003). See http://baike.baidu.com/view/698266.htm?fr=ala0_1_1, accessed on 2/1/2008.

¹⁵³ See <http://edu.sina.com.cn/talk/2000-06-18/4699.shtml>, accessed on 2/1/2009.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. This 'personal desire' portrayed by Zhu Qi refers to the way certain male elites make their judgements of the glam-writers' works based on a particular set of criteria different from the literary traditions.

¹⁵⁵ See <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2005-01-26/17515677844.shtml>, accessed on 4/11/2008.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

eminent male editors heard a new different voice from a young group of writers and eagerly promoted them in the media and the market. On the other hand, their negative reception by mainstream critics and the media made these critics reluctant to continue to support them. The post-70s writers became objects of debate for these official editors and critics, as Chinese women writers historically always did (Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, 1999: 198). An excess concern with certain post-70s glam-writers such as Wei Hui, Mian Mian and Ann Baby by the critics and their hype by the media also led to the side-lining of other less influential works from contemporaries such as Zhao Bo, and their male counterparts such as Li Shijiang, Ding Tian, and Feng Tang who were born in the 1970s too.

The emergence and prosperity of women's writing in 1990s China is linked to the establishment of a feminist consciousness by which I mean that women (writers) began to focus on themselves as women. The awakening of women's self-awareness gradually became a resource for women's writing (Dai Jinhua, 1999: 155; Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, 1999: 203). However, behind the flourishing of 1990s women's writing lay a two-fold crisis. First, after following the mainstream patriarchal paradigm of male intellectuals for centuries, Chinese women found it difficult to establish a female discourse.¹⁵⁷ This is a political and historical 'dilemma of discourse' for women writers (Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, 1999: 202-3). Second, in the existing patriarchal social pattern, 'patriarchal commercial culture' in particular, women's writing has embraced commercial values and characteristics. As an object of both the 'male gaze' and the 'female gaze' (discussed in Chapter 5 where I analyze the interviews with my women readers), women writers and women's writing have become rich market resources (Dai Jinhua, 1999: 155; Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, 1999: 204), which are recognized and exploited by both critics and the media. I shall discuss this in relation to consumer culture in the next section.

¹⁵⁷ Although it is arguable whether it is desirable or indeed possible to create a female discourse with a distinct expression of gender, the style of writing established by contemporary Chinese women writers is regarded as feminine and different from that of their male counterparts.

The Criticism of the Glam-Writers' Works as Literary Texts

As the last generation of Mao's children without a recollection of the revolution and the first generation who enjoyed the immediate advantages brought by the opening up and reform after 1978,¹⁵⁸ the post-70s glam-writers' works share a few characteristics which are at the centre of the male critics' and publishers' commercial consideration. For instance, a rebellion against tradition and the older generation permeates the post-70s narratives, not only in the sense that the post-70s tend to create an unsolvable and oppositional binary relation between their characters and their parents, but also in the sense that these characters do not take anything seriously but themselves, with an intrinsic sense of superiority over others and an indifference to the outside world, as the following excerpts from Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* show:

What sort of person am I? To my mother and father, I'm an evil little thing devoid of conscience (by five I'd learned how to stomp out, haughtily clutching my lollipop). To my teachers or ex-boss and colleagues at the magazine, I'm smart but hard-headed, a skilled professional with an unpredictable temperament who can guess how any film or a story will end from the way it begins (2001: 18).

When I finally realized that everything I had done until then was just a waste of my talent, I gave up my highly-paid job at the magazine. My parents despaired of me once again, since my father had had to pull a lot of strings to get me the job in the first place (ibid: 19-20).

The way we think is just too different. We're separated by a hundred generation gaps. We'd best respect one another rather than arguing our cases (ibid: 20).

In evaluating the post-70s glam-writers' works, Li Jingze observes a fundamental particularity among these writers which he terms 'the end of history' (Zong Renfa et

¹⁵⁸ As Chinese chairman Mao Zedong died in 1976, the generation born in the 1970s is considered the last generation under Mao's regime and the first to witness the opening up and reform in 1978.

al 1998).¹⁵⁹ This is represented in two ways. First, most post-70s narratives project an absence of parents either in the form of death (in Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby*, *Virgin in the Water*, and *Lover's Room*) or migrating abroad (in Mian Mian's *Candy* and *Every Good Child Deserves to Eat Candy*). The parents of the characters in these novels are often associated with a weak personality. For the post-70s writers, a resistance to authority represented by parents, teachers and employers, and a hatred of daily routine can only be vented through rebellious attitudes and behaviours and dispelled by engaging in a different lifestyle involving casual sex, night life and drug taking. As Li Jingze points out, for the post-70s love is 'in the present' without any 'historical value', 'exceeding sentiments and agony' (Zong Renfa et al 1998). While critics such as Shi Zhanjun and Zong Renfa tend to attribute this sense of 'the end of history' to a lack of 'self-awareness of a historical responsibility' (ibid) in dealing with relationships of love and sex and in real life, I would argue that this conclusion overgeneralises the post-70s writing. In my view, the glam-writers represent history from a different perspective and reflect an alternative social reality based on their particular experiences and feelings. As I shall demonstrate below, their way of writing and expression diverges significantly from the older generations' and Chinese mainstream literary traditions in terms of both style and content.

Li Jingze discusses the effect brought about by the sense of 'the end of history' in the post-70s texts:

It may be 'easy' (qingsong) to stand outside of history if it just makes one feel this 'easiness' [or lightness]. He or she [the writer] certainly has the ability to write a good novel based on this [lightness]. However, history has of course not yet ended... a person or a writer has to face it. This has nothing to do with 'apathy, dogmatic and oppressive things.' (Zong Renfa et al 1998, my translation)

While Li Jingze puts an emphasis on one type of history, the difference he detects in the post-70s writing is also observed by Sheldon Lu:

¹⁵⁹ See Zong Renfa, Shi Zhanjun, and Li Jingze (1998) 'A Dialogue about the "Born-in-the-1970s"', *Southern Cultural Forum* 6: n.p. See <http://www.literature.org.cn/article.asp?ID=12196>, accessed on 1/11/2008.

The novels of Mian Mian and Wei Hui indicate a radical discontinuity from previous authors and styles in the literary history of socialist and postsocialist China (2008: 175).

This 'radical discontinuity' of the post-70s glam-writers from their predecessors can be seen as a collective consciousness of breaking with a certain male-centred tradition and subverting and rewriting patriarchal discourse. If we agree with the critics on the point that adopting a different way of writing can be dismissed as an abandonment of history, not only do we deny the possibility of young urban women expressing themselves differently in a variety of ways after being suppressed by male elite intellectuals' discourse throughout Chinese patriarchal history, but we also neglect the multiplicity of women's writing and what Michelle Yeh coins the landscape of contemporary Chinese literature as 'culturally diverse', duoyuan (2000: 252). In my view in the 'culturally diverse' society of the late 1990s, Chinese women's writing developed and transformed to an extent that mainstream male critics felt a certain threat caused by the rise of these young writers. Therefore, they imposed a monolithic view on the glam-writers and their works, as well as the negative effects they might have, on the grounds that these writings do not match the patriarchal paradigm of Chinese literary tradition.

Among the five glam-writers, Mian Mian and Wei Hui have received most critical attention. Although Mian Mian's name is often linked with Wei Hui when the post-70s glam-writers and their works are discussed, the former is considered to possess a more courageous and adventurous trait by producing narratives in which she exposes her personal experiences in real life. From *Candy* to *La La La* (1997), the experiences of being a DJ in rock 'n' roll pubs and taking drugs inform Mian Mian's construction of marginalized characters in her writing. The portrait of problem youth who are longing for rescue and struggling on the edge of social morality and crime, is mediated by their pursuit of true love. Unlike what most critics define in post-70s writing as 'sex without love', the heroines in Mian Mian's novels such as *Candy* show a desperate aspiration to true love. Thus a tension between mainstream morality and

marginalized life reality permeates Mian Mian's novels. In analyzing *Candy*, literary scholar Chen Sihe argues:

Her [Mian Mian's] writing does not only make us pry into life experience at the edge of morality, but also allows us to see a new morality at the edge of life. When desire and the essence of life embrace each other, enchantment with aesthetics is born.¹⁶⁰ (my translation)

Wei Hui is considered to possess a certain level of literary talent and imagination (Gao Yuanbao 2001). To use Li Jingze's phrase, Wei Hui transforms the traditional genre of the novel into a certain kind of 'speech', i.e. a quasi-oral form, and she becomes a writer by 'speaking well' (Zong Renfa et al 1998). Compared to post-60s writers, according to Li Jingze, the post-70s glam-writers have 'adopted an anti-traditional way of writing and produced a variety of personal expressions and feelings' (ibid), which never appeared in Chinese literary history before. This unconventional style of writing is closely connected to the rebellion and desire that emerge in the novels. As Chen Sihe notes:

Many critics have mentioned a rebelliousness in Wei Hui's writing. However, they seemed to ignore the fact that such rebelliousness was not quite the same as the one we used to understand in academia. A desire for materiality in modern cities destroyed the naivety and trueness of youth...The wildness and barbarianism of the youth depicted in Wei Hui's novels indicate a tension between individual and society, representing an uninhibited desire [of youth] for material pleasure.¹⁶¹ (my translation)

Desire is one of the most frequently used words by male critics in discussing the post-70s glam-writers' works. In Mian Mian's novels, desire is often associated with

¹⁶⁰ See 'Desire Texts in Contemporary Metropolitan Society – Taking Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's Novels As Examples' by Chen Sihe. See <http://news.blcu.edu.cn/xbwx/main/ArticleShow.asp?ArtID=389>, accessed on 10/09/2008.

¹⁶¹ See 'Desire Texts in Contemporary Metropolitan Society – Taking Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's Novels As Examples' by Chen Sihe. See <http://news.blcu.edu.cn/xbwx/main/ArticleShow.asp?ArtID=389>, accessed on 13/9/2008.

crime and activities such as drug taking and prostitution which are constructed as a way of resisting official authority and institutions, whereas in the works of Wei Hui, Zhao Bo and other glam-writers, desire is connected to a thirst for materiality (including love and its material form as wealth). In discussing works flaunting women's desires in particular, critics such as Zhu Dake narrow women's desire to sexual promiscuity and material aspiration, judging women's desire on moral grounds.¹⁶²

As discussed previously, Chinese women were traditionally regarded as emotionalists with a subjective frame of mind. The post-70s glam-writers successfully turned this notion of subjectivity into the representation of the experience of a materialized body. Zhang Yiwu sees a 'highly isolating narcissism' of the body as a trait of the post-70s writing (Zhang Yiwu 2001). This provides a focus on the value and importance of the body itself. Almost all the glam-writers I discuss in this thesis focus on their characters' private sensory experiences in their novels. For example, in the first paragraph of her short story 'Pain' (Teng), Ann Baby writes:

In a dull room, she was taking off her black laced bra in front of him and only wearing the fat and old jeans. [She has] black and long hair, thick and gloomy. He saw a tattoo on the snow-white skin of her left breast. It was a blue and empurpling butterfly, with cunning and beautiful wings. He heard his heart beating when putting his fingers on it. Then he felt scared. He asked her, does it hurt? She smiled and said: it has no blood. So it does not hurt.¹⁶³ (my translation)

Here the body, or a part (the left breast), and an accessory (the tattoo) of the body carries a specific meaning differing from the traditional female body. This is a body which records sensory experiences through the tattoo and breaks with traditional Chinese expectations of a passive and conservative female body.¹⁶⁴ The butterfly

¹⁶² See http://news.xinhuanet.com/book/2004-06/09/content_1516730.htm, accessed on 11/10/2008.

¹⁶³ See <http://www.moon-soft.com/art/annbaby/teng.htm>, accessed on 11/10/2008.

¹⁶⁴ In traditional Chinese society, the woman's body is not seen by the man before marriage, and is often portrayed as a passive belonging without subjectivity.

signifies a female subject aspiring to freedom and emancipation.¹⁶⁵ The tattoo itself and the position in which the tattoo is displayed is against patriarchal conventions, putting to the forefront a femininity which scares the traditional man in the story. By constructing a seemingly simple conversation about the tattoo, the writer makes explicit a woman's courage, experience (physical and spiritual) and self-empowerment through her body. It is through the body that meaning and construction of the self are articulated. This is in fact common in women's literature, particularly autobiographical writings of the 1990s which depict a variety of subjective experiences of the female body.

The fact that the post-70s writing is defined as desire writing is reminiscent of the term body writing (*shenti xiezu*) which has been borrowed from French feminist theory and is often misused in the Chinese context to describe the writings of the glam-writers. Body writing as an expression began to enter Chinese literary circles in the 1990s. The term originated from French feminist scholars such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray. As early as the 1970s, Cixous advocated writing the body, *écriture féminine*, focusing on how bodily experience and unconscious desires shape women's cultural production:

Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard (1975: 39).

Cixous claims that women should reclaim their speech and express their desires through their bodies and their cultural production. For Cixous, there is a close relation between women's writing and women's bodies. The act of writing women's bodies and desires is for women a way to deconstruct and subvert the phallogentric system and construct their own feminine identity and subject position.

However, the term 'body writing' transformed dramatically when it was introduced into

¹⁶⁵ Although in his critique of Wei Hui's works critic Zhu Dake argues that in Chinese and Greek ancient legends the butterfly only refers to one meaning, which symbolizes lust or ardor, I think in Ann Baby's short story 'Pain' the butterfly tattoo indicates a strong female subjectivity and self-awareness. See <http://www.xbwhyj.cn/html/suibizatan/200810/05-429.html>, accessed on 3/10/2008.

the Chinese literary field (Qu 2004). In discussing the meaning of the body in the Chinese context, Sheldon Lu borrows the concept of biopolitics from Michel Foucault and elucidates the politics of the body in the glam-writers' works as follows:

Exposing the body, the body's private parts, private sensations, and private thoughts constitutes the substance of such novels. Writing about female sexuality by 'beautiful women writers' is the vogue today (Lu, 2008: 169).

The representation of the female body and female sexuality by the Chinese glam-writers is quite different from Cixous' intention of defining women's writing as writing the body. As observed by Lu, 'body writing' in China refers mainly to the content of the writing, whilst in the west writing the body implies a form of writing, i.e. a style as much as, if not more than, the content. The meaning of the notion of 'body writing' remains particular in the criticism of the glam-writers' works in the Chinese context.

As Zhang Yiwu points out:

The narcissism of the body does not resist a certain external oppression of the body, but the body itself constructs a new cultural force in the text which transcends the existent discourse system and provides the possibility for a new way of life (2001: 25, my translation).

According to Zhang, descriptions of the body in the glam-writers' texts are not aimed at defying the external world dominated by male discourse, as the New Women writers did in the 1920s and 1930s (although both generations share certain common traits in their writings as I shall discuss later in relation to urban culture). This 'new cultural force' is an extension of 'body narcissism' to a 'desire for materiality', as evidenced in the conjunction of body and lifestyle issues in most post-70s glam-writers' novels. In depicting a sexual scene in *Shanghai Baby*, Wei Hui reminds her readers of the protagonist Coco's pants' brand Calvin Klein. At the beginning of the novel, the writer tells the reader about the character's name which is inspired by her idol Ms. Coco Chanel. In a similar fashion, Zhao Bo adds a strong exotic flavour to her novel *The Dew on the Road* (Lushang de lu, 2003), capturing a number of typical bourgeois ways of living and scenes in which she attempts to portray a certain

westernized lifestyle in Europe. Zhang Yiwu regards this materialized form of narcissism as having a connection with the aspiration towards 'a bourgeois ideal of participation in cultural globalization' (2001: 25-6). Thus Zhang Yiwu concludes:

The new post-70s writers' writing is not merely a reflection of 'the end of history', an infatuation with consumption and hedonism, or a cultural testimony of individuality. It is an evident manifestation of conflicts and contradictions in Chinese bourgeois culture, embodying complex social and cultural significances (ibid: 28, my translation).

The rise of the post-70s writing is then suggestive of the social and cultural changes in contemporary Chinese society in the twenty-first century.

The glam-writers' texts as urban literature and an expression of consumer culture

While the narcissism of the body is often related to a strong material desire underpinned by a bourgeois lifestyle, a certain nostalgia for the past has also emerged in the glam-writers' works (Dai Jinhua 1997; Ferry 2003; Zhang Yiwu 2001). For instance, Ferry notices 'renewed interest in the qipao' (a traditional Chinese women's dress) in certain glam-writers' works (2003: 665). Both Wei Hui and Zhao Bo disclosed their pride in, and personal liking for, wearing traditional Chinese clothing in their novels and on public occasions. Hong Ying too has her distinctive style of wearing Chinese ancient dresses in real life.¹⁶⁶ So does Ann Baby (as I shall discuss in Chapter 5 where several of my women interviewees mentioned the characters' way of dressing in Ann Baby's texts). Femininity, once cherished as chastity and domesticity, which was then revisioned as being like men by the state, is now applauded as a fashion leading to women's 'increased visibility' or 'hypervisibility' (Ferry, 2003: 656). The 'sentiment' of nostalgia in the glam-writers' works in the late 1990s thus becomes 'a fashionable culture' (Dai Jinhua, 1997: 145). As Dai Jinhua notes:

As one of the most important cultural realities of contemporary China, rather than as a trend of thought or as an undercurrent that resists the systematic progress

¹⁶⁶ See <http://www.qikan.com.cn/Article/rwzk/rwzk200403/rwzk20040317.html>, accessed on 11/8/2009.

of modernization and commercialization, nostalgia functions more prevalently as a fashion. Rather than originating from the writings of intellectual elites, it is more a pulse of the not inelegant urban noise; the trappings of nostalgia become perfectly suited as alluring commercial packaging, as fashionable culture (ibid: 144-5).

For Dai, nostalgia is 'a testimony' of contemporary Chinese society's 'cultural catching up' and an 'invisible correspondence with the world phenomenon of nostalgic reflection' in the 1990s (ibid: 145). In a similar vein, Ferry argues that nostalgia is 'not only the means by which the Chinese people become accustomed to rapid urbanization and economic advancement', but also 'China's ticket to the world market' and thus its 'insertion in a global economy' (2003: 665). In analyzing the glam-writers' works, Ferry relates their sentiment of nostalgia to the writings of the 'New Women' writers in the 1930s, seeing the nostalgia of the glam-writers as 'one's ties to a national past as well as to a global culture that seeks entertainment in an exotic Other' (ibid).

This nostalgia partly manifests itself in the renaissance of urban literature to which the glam-writers' novels belong. A combination of nostalgia for the semi-colonial Shanghai, and the acceptance of, and blending with western culture and values in post-colonial Shanghai informs the glam-writers' urban writing. In *Shanghai Baby*, Coco is a typical Shanghai woman who shows her adoration for the architecture of Shanghai through her description of the city and also expresses her aspiration for a westernized lifestyle by engaging with foreigners. Both traits reveal the author's special liking for the city and complex sentiments for Shanghai, mixing a semi-colonial memory with a post-colonial flavour. In *Shanghai Baby* Wei Hui depicts women writers' particular ties with the city as follows:

It's because Shanghai is home to so many women like Zhu Sha that it's become a city whose vibrancy is tempered by feminine elegance. The aimless ennui of Eileen Chang's unmarried women and the refined melancholy of Chen Dan-

Yan's writing are rooted here. Some people call Shanghai 'the Women's City' (1999: 134).

As Sheldon Lu notes, the fact that most post-70s glam-writers were born and nurtured in a metropolis provides the material conditions and resources for their works (2008: 174).¹⁶⁷ The experience of living in urban China and in a metropolis not only provides these writers with local customs and knowledge which become the resources for their writing (Mian Mian's depiction of prostitutes' life conditions in Shenzhen and Ann Baby's descriptions of underground stations and coffee bars in Shanghai for instance), but also influences their ways of thinking and writing (the influence of western culture and post-colonial atmosphere of Shanghai, for example, on Wei Hui's ambitions). The sense of 'living in the urban' in the glam-writers' works directs critics' attention to the ongoing debates of the revival of urban literature (Dai 1999; Lu 2008; Zong Renfa et al 1998). In theorising the relationship between the urban and literature, Chen Sihe states:

When the two concepts urban and literature are connected as research objects, it simply takes two forms: one is the effect of the development of the modern city (urbanized city) upon literature; the other is the portrayal and imagination of the city in literary production. The study of the former falls into the category of sociology, studying literature from the outside. The latter is the other way round. Through an urbanized imagination of literature, we get to know the urban city. The internal study of literature is expanded towards its outside.¹⁶⁸

Whereas Chen Sihe defines the term urban literature in a universal way, Dai Jinhua suggests a different way of looking at this literary form and putting it into the Chinese

¹⁶⁷ Metropolises such as Shanghai and Beijing, and economically advanced provinces such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang in the southeast coast of China, enjoy an advantageous geographical position and thus more commercial and trading opportunities than the northwest and many other cities. Shanghai-born writer Mian Mian, Zhejiang-born writers Wei Hui and Ann Baby, and Jiangsu-born writer Zhao Bo all spent most of their time living and writing in Shanghai. Mian Mian had spent several years in her late teens in Shenzhen in southern China before returning to Shanghai. Ann Baby and Zhao Bo only moved to Beijing from Shanghai in recent years. Chongqing-born writer Hong Ying lived in London and travelled between London and Beijing regularly.

¹⁶⁸ See <http://www.eduww.com/Article/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=11160>, accessed on 17/11/2008.

context. Dai Jinhua notes a pitfall in Chinese intellectual and critical circles related to the uncritical appropriation of western terms in the Chinese context (1999: 72). As Dai argues:

What I call urban culture embodies at least two components – one is mass culture which is produced in modern/urbanized cities and consumed as a form of entertainment (it can also be called popular culture); the other is so-called elite culture or high culture which centres on urban living and human experiences and feelings of dwelling in metropolitan cities. Despite the transitory prevalence of neo-sensationalist fiction in the 1930s,¹⁶⁹ urban literature has not yet grown mature in contemporary Chinese history, but depended on two types of literature, namely popular culture/mass culture and revolutionary culture (ibid: 61, my translation).

Dai Jinhua points out that the term ‘mass culture’ is used differently and refers to different things in Chinese and American contexts (ibid: 72). In the United States mass culture is the culture for and consumed by middle-class people (a majority of the American population). There is, according to Dai, no equivalent group of people in China. Mass culture in the UK, also, has a very different constituency, embracing working-class people at least as much as middle-class people. Different forms of mass culture in the UK appeal to very different social groups, and in literature, distinctions are commonly made between high-brow, middle-brow and low-brow culture, with the latter two in particular being considered part of mass culture. By comparing differences in cultural consumption and family income between American and Chinese people, Dai interrogates ‘whose culture is “mass culture”’ and ‘who is the audience of urban literature’ in China (Dai, 1997: 72). Despite the different types of audiences and population mass culture has in American and Chinese societies, the glam-writers’ works are evidently not for an undifferentiated Chinese mass. The readership of the glam-writers’ works are still ‘young women as the largest consumer

¹⁶⁹ Neo-sensationalism (xinganjue pai) was considered the first modernist fiction genre in Chinese literary history (Lu, 2008: 175). It centres on daily affairs and human relationships in semi-colonial Shanghai during the period of Chinese literary modernism, emphasizing particularly the decadence and morbidity of urban life. See <http://www.cul-studies.com/Article/essay/200511/3030.html>, accessed on 11/11/2008.

base' (Ferry, 2003: 670). I shall demonstrate this further in Chapters 5 and 6.

While acknowledging that the glam-writers' narratives can be categorized as urban literature, overseas sinologists such as Lu classify these texts as a type of youth culture (2008: 174-5). However, neither classification can fully articulate the particularities of the post-70s writing, although their texts collectively represent an experience of young people living in urban China. Of course, the works of the post-70s glam-writers barely fall into the high culture/elite culture in Dai's latter category of urban literature, as the glam-writers differ too much from their older generations such as post-60s and post-50s women writers in terms of forms of expression and content of writing. Their fetishization of western bourgeois lifestyles and imitation of western culture has distanced the post-70s writers from the previous generations and their works from mainstream Chinese literature.

The Criticism of the Glam-Writers' Emergence as a Socio-Cultural Phenomenon

While mainstream critiques of the post-70s glam-writers' works centre either on the writers as people or on the texts (both the style and content of writing), Zhang Ning notes a recent trend among the post-70s writers in his contentious essay 'Post-70s: The Generation Getting Senile As Soon As They Were Born' ('70 hou, yi chusheng jiu shuailao de yidai' 2007):

From a literary talent perspective, the post-70s writers are no less than avant-garde or 'new-born generation' writers. However, born in the wrong period becomes their key experience, in which they have suffered the dilemma between the market and the literary system. After five or six years' strike, the post-70s writers changed suddenly from trouble-making and not-yet-grown-up children into old people who had experienced many vicissitudes of life (cangsang), as if they were getting senile as soon as they were born.¹⁷⁰ (my translation)

¹⁷⁰ See <http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2007-09-28/102013992882.shtml>, accessed on 14/10/2008.

Here Zhang Ning shifts the focus from the post-70s writers' works to their specific social and historical period, and attributes the decline of the post-70s writing to the socio-cultural context in which the post-70s writers produced their works. They are constructed as inhabiting the gap between the 'red culture' (Maoist/Communist culture)¹⁷¹ and the 'yellow culture' (pornographic culture). According to Zhang Ning, the post-70s writers are the generation who live 'in-between the cracks' and have been challenged by the post-80s writers whose texts aim to meet the market demand, and post-60s and post-50s writers who represent the traditional literary system.¹⁷² Under pressure from both their predecessors and their junior followers, the post-70s writers seem to have exhausted their inspirations and impulses. As Zhang Ning notes:

The post-70s writers began to write in the late 1990s when market transformation became a prevalent notion. Abundant material from the west flooded into Chinese society, exerting an enormous effect of disintegration. It deconstructed the spiritual resources of traditional May Fourth intellectuals such as forms of expression and aesthetic taste. Writers had to explore new things, and some of them did introduce new forms of writing and write differently. However, this attempt for exploration was soon counteracted by the new dominance of internet [literature] and commercialized writing by the post-80s [writers].¹⁷³ (my translation)

Writing at a particular age in a particular social context exerts a specific influence on literary production. Thus Zhang Ning points to a lifecycle issue here which impacts on the glam-writers' writing. Xie Youshun agrees with Zhang Ning on this point by offering his view on why the post-70s glam-writers gradually became weaker in terms of literary creativity:

A certain potential crisis is represented by a premature apathy of the post-70s writers. This is also one of the reasons why this generation has lost its creativity

¹⁷¹ 'Red culture' has prevailed among Chinese youth since the 1980s. It is centred on revolutionary movements led by the Communist Party during Mao's period, and criticizes the materialization of life. See <http://www.redculture.cn/Index.htm>, and <http://www.rp.org.cn/Index.shtml>, accessed on 14/10/2008.

¹⁷² See <http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2007-09-28/102013992882.shtml>, accessed on 14/10/2008.

¹⁷³ See <http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2007-09-28/102013992882.shtml>, accessed on 14/10/2008.

in a short period. Easy living, stable jobs, ample financial resources, and a steady increase of fame all contribute to a laziness in the writings of the post-70s writers. At least at the artistic level, [they] lack a sharp spirit of exploration.¹⁷⁴ (my translation)

Xie Youshun effectively points out that the post-70s generation has had it too easy both materially and culturally. He argues that this has impacted negatively on their works which lack seriousness and discernment. The post-70s glam-writers such as Wei Hui and Zhou Jieru stopped writing and vanished from the Chinese literary scene for various reasons.¹⁷⁵ However, in my view, it may be too early to define these writers as lazy and lacking initiative in terms of their literary creativity. After all they produced their writings in their twenties.

In evaluating the post-70s phenomenon, Li Jingze observes that its emergence coincided with several new developments in Chinese literature: the writers first gained their notoriety on the internet; the mass media first exercised its power on these writers; their emergence coincided with the rise of self-awareness of 'petty-bourgeois' (xiaozi) groups in advanced cities.¹⁷⁶ When the turn from the planned/state economy to the market/commodity economy occurred in the 1990s, not only was Chinese society affected by marketization and globalization, but the literary arena too was affected by consumer culture and what is called the recreation economy (yule jingji).

On the one hand, as there was a wide-spread interest in learning foreign languages in 1990s China, massive numbers of foreign works were introduced and translated

¹⁷⁴ See http://epaper.dahe.cn/dhb/htm2007/t20071105_1191369.htm, accessed on 4/11/2008.

¹⁷⁵ Wei Hui did not publish any novels after the ban of *Shanghai Baby* until 2007, and travelled to Europe and the U.S. to look for opportunities for publishing her novels in other countries. She started her Masters degree in Film in Beijing in September 2007. Zhou Jieru migrated to California in recent years without any of her works being published.

¹⁷⁶ Based on my interviews with women readers and my observation of the glam-writers' blogs, the petty-bourgeois in more advanced parts of China constitute a large proportion of the readership of the post-70s glam-writers' novels who themselves came from petit bourgeois backgrounds in Shanghai, Shenzhen and southeast cities. See <http://www.jschina.com.cn/gb/jschina/culture/node19885/node19896/userobject1ai1680201.html>, accessed on 30/10/2008.

into Chinese. Young Chinese took pains to learn about various foreign languages and cultures. Thus the number of readers who read Chinese classical literature decreased, while those interested in foreign popular culture increased. On the other hand, the alliance of literature and the market facilitated by publishers and booksellers required attention to market demands, the circulation of publications and the exposure of writers (Ferry 2003; Lu 2008). Thus the market became paramount. Literature as entertainment became a symbol of fashion for both producers and consumers of contemporary Chinese popular culture.

Apart from the various socio-cultural factors which impacted on the post-70s writing, critic Shi Zhanjun affirms the literary value of the post-70s works by making the following comment:

What the post-70s writers have brought to the Chinese literary world is the courage they present. We are horrified by their 'behavioural art'. The extent to which they disregard the literary tradition contributes to the sophistication of literary forms at the end of the twentieth century...The existence of such diversification is important for a healthy literature. Only on this basis can we then preserve an ideal promise and expectation for deep, real and impressive masterpieces. (Zong Renfa et al 1998, my translation)

Shi argues that having a range of forms produces discernment. Here the idea of literature is set up in oppositional terms to the post-70s writing. According to Shi, the post-70s writing seems to act as a barometer for 'masterpieces'.

In the contemporary, culturally diverse China, the gap between high and popular culture has narrowed, and the boundaries between literature and various forms of entertainment have become blurred. As Xie Youshun states:

Everything can be deconstructed and reconstructed. What is characterized by destructiveness often gains applause, and exaggerated speech is favoured by the media. Getting attention is worth everything.¹⁷⁷ (my translation)

While Xie Youshun asked 'whether we want to obtain limited honour in this way', writer Yu Guangzhong¹⁷⁸ used the term 'all kinds of schools contend' (baijia zhengming) to describe present literary production in China:

Something that is fashionable and prevalent may become popular for a certain period, but may not last long. Everything, good or bad [literary works], has the space to develop. Only time decides what will last.¹⁷⁹ (my translation)

Starting with the beauty writers (meinü zuojia), followed by the youth writers (shaonian zuojia), also known as the post-80s writers such as Han Han,¹⁸⁰ Guo Jingming,¹⁸¹ Chun Shu and Zhang Yueran,¹⁸² and the stud writers (meinan zuojia) represented by Ge Hongbing,¹⁸³ labels have emerged continuously in the Chinese literary field in recent years. Both the literary critics and the writers themselves take responsibility for pigeonholing writers into certain groups. The former tend to attribute this categorization either to certain commonalities shared by the writers or by their works, or to the particular social and historical context in which these writers

¹⁷⁷ See http://www.china.com.cn/book/txt/2008-04/16/content_14960680.htm, accessed on 28/10/2008.

¹⁷⁸ Yu Guangzhong (1928 -), born in Jiangsu province, poet, Director of the Department of Literature at Taiwan Sun Yat-Sen University, published *Blue Feather* (Lanse de yumao, 1954) and *All Saints Day* (Wanshengjie, 1960).

¹⁷⁹ See http://www.china.com.cn/book/txt/2008-04/16/content_14960680.htm, accessed on 28/10/2008.

¹⁸⁰ Han Han (1982-), born in Shanghai, dropout from high school, representative figure of post-80s writers, car racer, singer. He won the first place in the first competition of New Concept Composition (xingainian zuowen dasai) in 1999. His published novels include *Three Layered Gate* (Sanchongmen, 2000) and *Minus One Degree* (Lingxia yidu, 2000). See <http://www.twocold.org/>, and <http://book.sina.com.cn/105/2005/0609/16.html>, accessed on 30/10/2008.

¹⁸¹ Guo Jingming (1983-), born in Sichuan province and graduated from the University of Shanghai, another representative figure of post-80s writers. He won the first place in the third and fourth *New Concept Composition Competition* in 2002 and 2003. His published works include the collection of prose *The Margin of Love and Pain* (Ai yu tong de bianyuan, 2002), the novel *An Illusion City* (Huancheng, 2003), and *How Many Flowers Fall In The Dream* (Mengli hualuo zhi duoshao, 2003). For further information of his books, see <http://book.sina.com.cn/people/quojinming/>, and <http://www.gjmcn.com/>, accessed on 30/10/2008.

¹⁸² Zhang Yueran (1982-), born in Shangdong province, currently studying Computer Science at the National University of Singapore, won the first place in the *New Concept Composition Competition*. Her published works include *Red Shoes* (Hong Xie, 2004), *Ten Loves* (Shi'ai, 2004), and *The Carp* (Li, 2008). For further information of her books, see <http://baike.baidu.com/view/41430.htm>, and <http://book.sina.com.cn/people/zhangyueran/>, accessed on 30/10/2008.

¹⁸³ Ge Hongbing (b. 1968), critic, writer, Professor of Literature and Art at the Shanghai University. He published his autobiographical novel *The Sandbed* (Shachuang) in 2003, which was regarded as a piece of body writing.

produced their texts, whereas the latter take up the concept defined by the former consciously and unconsciously in their literary production and extra-literary activities.

As to the glam-writers as women, the 'hypervisibility', to use Ferry's term, of the women writers is evident in most post-70s writers' writing. As a marketing strategy for book sales, the focus on the glam-writers' bodies and sexual activities was exploited by various forces such as literary critics, the publishers and booksellers, as well as the media. As Zong Renfa points out:

That is how an absurd media-produced entity 'beauty writer' (meinü zuojia) comes into existence. It is common sense that there is no relation between a beautiful woman (meinü) and a writer (zuoja). To link these two words together is to offer a stunt to the audience in a patriarchal society. Even if women writers hope to portray themselves with charm, it does little to help their works. Such a media ploy deliberately builds up a false relation between beautiful women and writers, and then criticizes this relation. The writers who are labeled 'beauty writers' are the victims in this process. The way in which some post-70s writers become famous has little connection with their works, but is very closely related to their life experiences (Zong Renfa et al, 2000: 50, my translation).

While Zong Renfa regards the glam-writers as victims in the process of being hyped by the media, Xie Youshun offers a different view by pointing out that blurring the boundaries between the characters' lives in the novels and the writers' personal lives in reality was a conscious act on the part of the glam-writers.¹⁸⁴ The 'I' in the novel is both the narrator and her role model in real life in Wei Hui's narratives, saying for example 'every morning when I open my eyes I wonder what I can do to make myself famous' (Wei Hui, 2002: 1); and 'in fact, it was my grandmother who predicted that I would be a writer. With a literary star shining down on me and a belly full of ink, she said I would make my mark one day' (ibid: 19). The conflation of author and narrator serves both as a writing technique and as a marketing strategy for Wei Hui. I shall

¹⁸⁴ See http://epaper.dahe.cn/dhb/htm2007/t20071105_1191369.htm, accessed on 15/09/2008.

elaborate the glam-writers' conscious effort of self-promotion in relation to their personal blogs in Chapter 6.

In real life, Wei Hui did succeed in her career as a best-seller and literary celebrity around 2000. By deliberately blurring the boundaries between the life of the author and that of the characters in her novels, Wei Hui encouraged readers to see them as closely related. An immediate relation between the character's life in the novel and the writer's life experience was built up in a quasi-autofictional fashion. This is an outcome attributed to both the writer's conscious blurring of real life and fictional world, and the media's representation of the glam-writers' private lives. Based on his observation of the complex relationship between the writer, the market, the media, and the public, critic Zhang Hong¹⁸⁵ concludes that:

The era of the cultural commodity economy has arrived, signalled by the emergence of Wei Hui and her works such as *Shanghai Baby*. One of the characteristics that a commodity economy embodies is packaging and hype. Thus both literary entertainment and celebrity writers are the products of the commodity economy. While our society has stepped into the initial stage of this economy, the market is not yet ready to accommodate the various modes of sensationalizing in a rational and mature way.¹⁸⁶ (my translation)

Whether or not we are in 'the primary phase of a cultural commodity economy' as Zhang Hong has termed it is too early to conclude. However, it is true that the public's desire for and pursuit of material consumption impinged on their loyalty to pure/serious literature. The alliance of vulgarism, consumerism, and fashion has led to a particular type of literature, recreation literature, and a star-making system of celebrity writers.¹⁸⁷ The Chinese glam-writers have produced a new kind of women's discourse through depicting women's personal experiences and desires in the Chinese metropolis, but this has met with much resistance by literary critics due to its

¹⁸⁵ Zhang Hong, cultural critic, column writer, Professor at Shanghai Normal University.

¹⁸⁶ See <http://book.sina.com.cn/xiaoshuoxuankan/2004-02-19/3/44511.shtml>, accessed on 27/10/2008.

¹⁸⁷ See <http://www.xschina.org/show.php?id=8137>, accessed on 6/8/2008.

own resistance to traditional Chinese literary values and its association with the commercialization and commodification of literature.

To sum up, for most Chinese mainstream critics who insist on a particular literary tradition and have negative attitudes towards the glam-writers' works, these writers' texts have broken with that tradition - thus subverting patriarchal conventions. As observed by male critic Wang Meng (1995), the shift from the male dominated cultural order of the Cultural Revolution to the flourishing of female sexuality and individual personal experience in women's writing in the 1990s, goes together with Chinese women having created a particular kind of 'public space' for themselves, and 'even hav[ing] a hand in the crafting of their public personae' (in Ferry, 2003: 670). This, according to Yang, makes explicit 'China's emergence from a closed socialist society to a consumerist culture that commodifies "the bodies, sexualities, and images of women"' (Yang, 1999: 51).

The majority of mainstream critics and editors of literary periodicals are male, born in the 1950s and 1960s. They have dominated mainstream ideology and the discourse of the leading media. Whether male critiques of body writing are based on the notion of men's 'social responsibility', or a male panic at female resistance to and subversion of phallogocentrism (Xi Huiling, 2003: 133), is hard to determine. Nevertheless, when critics feel discomfort and fail to engage with women's different ways of writing and forms of expression, they either provide a monolithic opinion of the glam-writers' texts such as 'exerting bad influences on Chinese youth' or divert the public's attention to the function of the market and media and their effects upon literature, both of which provide commercial and social grounds for the glam-writers' writings. The criteria according to which critics view these texts are based on certain ideas about Chinese literary traditions and paradigms. However, it may be more important for readers to understand these works as a new kind of women's writing produced at a particular age of the writers, in relation to the social and cultural

contexts in which China has experienced rapid historical transformations through its participation in cultural and economic globalization.

As one type of the reception, the Chinese literary critics' engagement with the glam-writers' works carries at least three implications. First, the glam-writers' writing in the late 1990s as an unfamiliar and gendered literary phenomenon failed to gain nuanced responses from mainstream literary critics. This is partly due to the fact that mainstream critics based their judgement on whether the glam-writers' works matched a particular literary tradition. Second, certain critics' prejudice against the glam-writers and their works based on this particular tradition resulted in pigeonholing the glam-writers in specific ways. Not only did this categorization impinge on individual women writers, but it also indicated that mainstream critics failed to establish a new perspective or a different set of criteria to evaluate certain literary texts, and that current Chinese literary criticism has its weaknesses and deficiencies, including a lack of adequate theories and practices to discuss the emergence of new types of literature. Third, the alignment of contemporary Chinese literature with the market economy constitutes a kind of consumer culture which poses new challenges to both writers and literary critics in terms of literary production and its corresponding literary criticism. Instead of following a particular tradition as the only parameter, Chinese literary critics nowadays need to mobilize different sets of criteria to engage with market-driven literature (bestsellers) and serious literature (classicals/canonized works).

As mentioned in the Introduction, two glam-writers' novels were banned by the Chinese government in 2000. This seemingly corresponded to the view held by many literary critics that the glam-writers' works were sources of corruption and degradation and had a bad influence upon their readers. In next chapter I shall therefore discuss actual readers' responses to these novels and the effects of these works as perceived by them.

Chapter 5: The Reception of the Chinese Glam-Writers' Works by Women Readers

As my research focuses on the reception of the Chinese glam-writers' works by different reading constituencies, one of the most direct resources for understanding this are the readers who have read these glam-writers' novels, or at least have a certain level of knowledge of these works by various means of reading and knowing. As indicated before, young Chinese women constitute the major readership of these novels. This chapter functions as a bridge between my analysis of the literary criticism of the glam-writers' works in Chapter 4 and my own observation of the interactions on these glam-writers' blogs in Chapter 6, exploring the ways in which women readers have received these works in mainland China. My analysis of the reception by literary critics in the previous chapter was my initial attempt to consider the glam-writers' texts from the viewpoint of literary critics and academics engaged in professional reading. In this chapter I have moved on from the professional critical eyes of literary critics to the embrace of non-professional readers, from documented readings to spontaneous, verbal narratives, and thus from the 'public' – reading for professional purposes - to the 'private'- reading for leisure/pleasure.

Review of Reception Theory and Reader-Response Criticism

I base my investigation of the young Chinese women's reading principally on reader-response criticism within the framework of feminist qualitative research. Tompkins has observed that:

reader-response criticism is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out an area for investigation (1980: 9).

The term reader-response criticism is also regarded as 'a general term that refers to a number of different approaches of modern criticism and literary theory that focus on

the responses of readers, either individual readers or readers belonging to specific categories, such as class, gender, ethnicity, etc., to literary works, rather than on the works themselves considered as self-contained entities'.¹⁸⁸ It therefore opposes the theories of formalism and New Criticism, both of which focus on the texts themselves and overlook the extra-textual contexts and the reader's role in producing meanings of text, but emphasizes:

a progressively accumulating body of knowledge, an aggregate of concepts, tools, taxonomies, and procedures of discovery which enable the critic to define the object of his study precisely and to deal with it in a 'scientific' fashion (Freund, 1987: 69).

Scholarly attention has long been paid to the active role of the reader in literary reception (Barthes 1977; Culler 1975; Fish 1980; Hall, 1981; Holland 1985).

Originated from the German Constance School, reader-response criticism as a school of reception theory was first advocated by Wolfgang Iser (1974, 1978) and Hans-Robert Jauss (1982) in the 1960s and 1970s. It was then promoted by Stanley Fish in the 1980s, whose works are characterized by both phenomenological and epistemological approaches to reader-response criticism.¹⁸⁹ In his best-known volume *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Fish 1980), Fish privileges the reader in a more active position in the meaning production of the text than the author of the text.

Iser's phenomenology of the reading process, 'without which the aesthetics of literary reception cannot be described' (Freund, 1987: 134), 'provides critics with a new repertoire of interpretive devices and thus brings to light a new set of facts for observation and description' (Tompkins, 1980: 15). Iser emphasizes in particular what happens to the reader in the process of reading, reconciling the reader's actualization, or concretization of the text without threatening the author's role in

¹⁸⁸ See <http://www.calvertonschool.org/waldspurger/pages/reader.htm>, accessed on 23/07/2008.

¹⁸⁹ In his essay titled 'The Reader-Response Theory of Stanley Fish' in *A Brief History of Literary Theory III*, Chris Lang analyses Fish's reader-response theory by means of viewing his theory comprising two approaches: phenomenological and epistemological respectively. See <http://www.xenos.org/essays/litthry4.htm>, accessed on 21/07/2008.

producing the text. In this chapter I particularly focus on Iser's work as Iser's assertion of the reader's active role in concretizing the text during the reading not only helps me to understand the reception of the glam-writers' works by the Chinese literary critics who read critically for professional purposes, but offers me insights into the ways in which non-professional readers read and experience these texts, including the young Chinese women readers in my research.

While literary theorists such as Fish, Iser, and Jauss discuss reader-response criticism in a gender-neutral manner, Lynne Pearce illustrates the text-reader relationship from a feminist perspective. In *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (1997), Pearce shows how a feminist academic reads and what happens to feminist readers in the process as well as the practice of reading. Utilizing the metaphor 'reading as romance', Pearce turns the passive reader of a text into an active/interactive participant who does not only interpret the meaning of the text, but also 'interacts and dialogizes with texts in a non-instrumental way' (ibid: 17). The important dimension here is the imbrication of the emotional in the professional. It is crucial to realize the reader's performance of interacting and dialogizing with a text in the reading event, characterized by Iser as 'an act of concretization':

central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient. This is why the phenomenological theory of art has emphatically drawn attention to the fact that the study of a literary work should concern not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text. The text itself simply offers 'schematized aspects' through which the subject matter of the work can be produced, while the actual production takes place through an act of concretization (Iser, 1978: 20-1).

Here I want to cite the following conclusion which Iser draws, because I think there is a necessity to look at Iser's theory of aesthetic response before introducing Pearce's concept of 'the textual other' which I shall discuss in the following:

the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic:

the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, but must be situated somewhere between the two (ibid: 21).

So what lies there between 'the reality of the text' and 'the subjectivity of the reader' (ibid), is *the textual other*, which I find of key importance not only in the analysis of the text-reader relationship and the reader's 'act of concretization', but also in my analysis of readers' reception of glam-writers' works. Pearce explains 'the textual other' as follows:

The textual other can be represented by many things as well as by a character in the text: it might also take the form of a 'structure of feeling', an interlocutory subject position (how a character in the text positions us), an author-function, an interpretive community, or the (covert/overt) audience/addressee of our own reading... The textual other can, in other words, be both a textual and a contextual point of contact for the reader, and individual reading-events might well move between others (1997: 17).

This conceptualization of the textual other is prominent in Pearce's text. While recognizing an 'outdated and theoretically suspect' notion of regarding the textual other as a character in the text, Pearce indicates at great length that the textual other can be 'whoever or whatever causes us to engage with a text in a manner that is beyond the will-to-interpretation' (ibid: 20). Thus any 'affective dimension of the reading process' can be regarded as the outcome of the text-reader relationship, in which readers discover 'the textual other' both 'inside and outside the text' (ibid).

The aim of this chapter then is to examine the actual women readers' reception of the glam-writers' works, in particular those of the selected five glam-writers namely Ann Baby, Hong Ying, Mian Mian, Wei Hui, and Zhao Bo. By discovering different responses to and changing perceptions of these glam-writers' texts, I shall demonstrate what factors, both intra-textual and extra-textual, influence readers'

views of the writers and their works in question. I shall discuss to what extent and in what ways the glam-writers' works are viewed by the young women readers as impacting upon them. Following Pearce's concept of 'the textual other', an investigation of what constitutes *the textual other* in ordinary Chinese women's consumption of the glam-writers' novels will also be carried out.

Researching Actual Women Readers' Responses

The main research question of my fieldwork was how Chinese women readers in mainland China perceived their responses to the selected glam-writers' works. To understand this, I divided the interviews into five parts. I started with a brief introduction to the interview and questions about the interviewees' demographic details. I then asked about their reading history and practice, such as what genre they were most interested in and what and whose novels they had read. At the end of this part, I mentioned the post-70s glam-writers to obtain responses in relation to these specific writers and their works from my interviewees. Following the questions about their favourite women writers, works, favourite themes and characters in the novels, I asked my interviewees about details of the novels, their perceptions of the influences of these novels on them, and their views of the relations between the author and the character in the novel. I then changed the focus from the reception of these writers and their novels to the interviewees' narratives of themselves, their personal experiences and life stories. I asked about their attitudes towards the lifestyles described in the novels, and about similarities between their lives and those described in the texts. I did this in part because some of these novels, such as *Shanghai Baby*, were originally banned in China as it was argued that they would exert a negative influence on potential readers. I wanted to discover if such a threat existed. Finally I asked about the interviewees' participation and activities on the glam-writers' blogs and their online practices, partly to indicate the reception of the glam-writers' works on the glam-writers' blogs and therefore build a bridge between this constituency and the bloggers.

Although the actual interview structure in my fieldwork was divided into five parts as described above, I divide the following analysis of the interviewing data into four sections: reading habits/history, author-reader relationship, text-reader relationship, and the reader's personal/real-life experience in relation to the lifestyles described in the glam-writers' novels.

Reading habits/history

According to the interview data, my interviewees tended to read shorter and lighter texts rather than lengthy and serious works. As F2 said:

I do not do much reading. I am not a patient person. I do not have the patience to read lengthy novels or tales. I like reading short articles, like [those in] the magazines.

Most interviewees did not read books on a regular basis, whereas ten out of fifteen interviewees read magazines regularly. Around half of these interviewees who read magazines read women's magazines which were written for and targeted at women. These magazines are popular among female readers because of their coverage of issues such as diet, fashion, family, furniture/internal decoration, and relationships, etc. My interviewees were not interested in specific kinds of books. Nor did they read the same books more than once. Following graduation from university and starting to work, they had reduced their reading to magazines and surfing on the internet. For instance, F14 said:

I used to read books from the Sanlian bookstore, but stopped later. Now I mainly read fashion magazines such as *Cosmo*, *Raili*, *Elle*, *Vogue*, or *Nüyou* [Women's Friend], etc. They are low cost magazines.

I like surfing on the internet, reading news and relevant information. But I buy few books (F7).

I used to read essays such as *The Reader* when I was at university, and read

very little afterwards (F5).

The frequency of reading a book among my interviewees was quite low, ranging from 'every month' to 'a long time ago' or 'hardly'. Overall speaking, my interviewees did not emerge as avid readers.

In terms of the genres of literature they preferred, twelve out of fifteen interviewees said that they were most interested in novels, while two of those twelve were also interested in essays, two in prose, and one in both prose and essays. One did not have any particular genre which she was interested in. Two interviewees said they were most interested in essays and articles. Two out of the fifteen interviewees also mentioned that they read very few poems and meant to get rid of them. F12, for example, said: 'basically I like novels. Actually I like [reading] all of the genres. But I keep far away from poems, because I couldn't write poems at all when I joined the literature society at university.' While poems seemed one of the genres which readers felt most alienated from, novels, contemporary novels in particular, remained the most popular and accessible genre for my interviewees.

The interviewees stated that their reading habits were informed by several factors. Firstly, the nature and requirements of the jobs they had played a significant role in their reading habits. For instance, F6 was a reporter/editor for a local newspaper in Xuzhou. In answering the question how often she read, she said: 'what I do is the media [the press], so I have to take the lead in knowing things, including reading the latest bestsellers, newspapers and magazines. I read every day.' The educational consultant F2 told me that she usually read news and current affairs and that she was especially concerned with entertainment, fashion and lifestyles, but also paid attention to education because it was related to her job. Therefore, both F6 and F2 consciously read for professional/occupational purposes. But apart from that, and more generally, my interviewees' reading habits changed a lot after they started to work. Elements such as what was read (different genres and materials of readings), modes of reading (in paperback or on the internet, in a concentrated or a leisurely

way), duration and frequency of reading all changed after my interviewees left school. Several interviewees mentioned that reading depended on their mood sometimes.

For example, F1 said:

...it depends on the mood. I do not like to read narratives, but some short essays...I reduced my reading after going back to China. (I read) once or twice a week, half to one hour every time.

F9 also said:

I do the most reading on the internet, and also read magazines. It depends on my mood whether I read books or not. I don't read poems or prose. I like to read novels.

In addition, readers' reading interest was to some extent affected by their ability to comprehend and handle the content of the reading material. Overall speaking, my interviewees' reading interest was determined by several factors such as their educational and occupational background, their ability to understand the reading material, and possibilities of accessing these reading. However, I found that my interviewees' access to the glam-writers' novels, Ann Baby's and Wei Hui's in particular, coincided with their school years. I shall discuss this later in relation to reasons for buying or reading the glam-writers' books.

Author-reader relationship

Before getting into the texts, I asked my interviewees about their personal opinions of the glam-writers. All the interviewees said that they had heard of them, although not every interviewee had read their works. Four interviewees said that they had not read these glam-writers' novels, including one who disdained to read any of them. They tended to call these writers 'beauty writers' (meinü zuojia) when mentioning them or their works, and some had definite opinions as to what this label stood for. As F7 said:

The name 'beauty writer' has changed over time. Initially some women came to join in writing. The title 'beauty writer' did not really mean beauty writer, but was a sort of disdain and depreciation. Beauty writer somehow equates to body writing,

writing with the body. These writers experienced a process of *categorization*. Initiated by Mian Mian, beauty writers were thought to write with their bodies. The title was more of a lampoon and mockery. Then the writers changed and many of their works were considered as women's writing, not the previous narrow notion (my emphasis).

According to F7, 'the previous narrow notion' refers to the notion of body writing which was initially related to the post-70s glam-writers such as Mian Mian and Wei Hui. It is common to equate 'beauty writer' to 'body writing' in the Chinese literary field. As previously indicated, there is a significant difference in the meaning of this phrase between the Chinese and western context. The Chinese glam-writers' texts invest a great deal in depicting women's personal experiences, both physical and psychological, including details of sexual experience through the female body. Body writing in China therefore refers to writing about the body and corporeal experiences, often associated with a decadent lifestyle. Although this way of writing was then followed by certain male writers such as Ge Hongbing, body writing still remains a typical characteristic of the glam-writers' works.

The term 'beauty writer' has problematic connotations in academia as well as among Chinese readers. From the point of a view of my women readers, both 'beauty' and 'writer' were contentious. My interviewees questioned the veracity of the so-called glam-writers being beautiful and their literary talents. F10 saw pictures of some glam-writers on the websites and told me her views of these writers' appearances: 'they are actually not beautiful at all'; whereas F8 did not feel it worth reading these writers' novels and told me her opinion independent of reading any of those novels: 'why did they waste paper [by writing novels]?' Among some of my interviewees, these writers clearly had a relatively poor reputation.

Regarding these ambivalent attitudes towards the glam-writers and the label created for them, F11 offered a cogent explanation of how she saw these writers as a 'group',

and the phenomenon of labelling:

Actually I hate the act of adding a label to other people. In my opinion, a symbol is a kind of simplification. Perhaps such a symbol does summarize some of their [glam-writers'] commonality or generality. However, it also covers up the individuality and personality of each woman writer. The disadvantage is that some with little or no knowledge of these writers come to criticize them. What they criticize is just the symbol, as well as meanings associated with the surface of this symbol in their understanding ...I never regard them as a group. That's why I do not make a comment on this group. How they [the post-70s glam-writers] differ from the old generation is that the latter are famous for their works, while the former are *famous for being themselves*.

Apparently, F11 did not agree with the categorization of these writers as such, as categorization concealed individuals' distinctiveness and characteristics. With the phrase 'they are *famous for being themselves*' she highlighted the *celebrity* status of these writers, as opposed to their status as *writers*. While F11 tried to give a piece of advice about reading these writers' novels: 'if you really want to approach their texts, you'd better get far away from these criticisms', the second-year university student F3 made the following comment after reading all the books of one of the glam-writers, Ann Baby:

I think it is far-fetched to label Ann Baby a beauty writer. Some so-called beauty writers, such as Mu Zimei, simply promote themselves by creating a stir with little or no talent. The media also help to create this sensation. This may be a result of the era too. It is too far-fetched to call these people writers. Perhaps some of them have a talent for being a writer, but most of them do not. In my opinion, only Ann Baby has such talent. I don't know other people. I do not criticize them since I do not know them yet. I respect the way they choose to live their lives or to survive under the pressure of the media. It is after all their choice.

Not only did F3 notice the phenomenon of sensationalizing the glam-writers, but almost all my interviewees were aware of the sensation caused by the so-called

beauty writers. They expressed their opinions of the packaging and marketing of these glam-writers by the various parties, including the writers themselves. F9 saw this sensationalizing as 'planned':

I think it is a market-driven demand. The emergence of a person or a group is the outcome of a successful campaign. The public's attention to the work has been diverted to the writers. This is both successful and unsuccessful. It is unsuccessful because attention has been put on things which are useless. It has diverted the attention which used to be placed on the works. For a writer, the question is whether to put effort into packaging herself or her works. It is successful because it has attracted many people who usually don't read the books. Because of the writer, they come to read the books. A writer who has written fine works certainly hopes to put effort into the works. If the effort is put into packaging the writer self, many may think it is a kind of shame. I think those writers have little confidence in their works and they know they have little literary talent. So they keep emphasizing other things in order to prove themselves.

F9 clearly saw the sensationalizing of these writers as a way of obscuring their lack of literary talent and an indication of the writers' lack of confidence in their own works.

F11 recognized the role which the media played in sensationalizing these glam-writers by pointing out changes in what the media did in the past and in the present. She emphasized the differences in transmitting cultural products in this era which were principally made by the media:

I think it is because they were born in this era, in which celebrities are brought up. The media and cultural transmission in this era have had tremendous influences on people's lifestyles, and completely changed our conventional way of producing and transmitting cultural products. In the past, the media was not much involved in the process of producing celebrities, maybe in a very traditional way. If you are a writer, the media's job is to promote your work, not to keep an eye on the hen who lays an egg. Nowadays, the media are keen on digging out backside stuff. It is very difficult for a celebrity to escape from this. What the

media really want to do is to sensationalize the writer. The work is less important. Both F9 and F11 indicated in their narratives the social and cultural reasons for diverting attention to the writers as people rather than their literary works.

Unlike the old generations who became famous for their *works*, as discussed in the previous chapter, the glam-writers whose works are discussed in this thesis made themselves and were made *famous for being themselves*. The recognition of the role which the media and various third parties such as publishing companies and booksellers played in marketing and packaging them has not only weakened readers' engagement with the texts, but also engendered readers' questioning of their intellectuality and motivation for writing. This might be one of the reasons why most of my interviewees liked women writers of an older generation better. The latter included Bing Xin (1900-1999), Zhang Ailing (1920-1995), Zhang Jie (b. 1937), San Mao (1943-1991, Taiwan), Huo Da (b. 1945), Yi Shu (b. 1946, Hong Kong), Bi Shumin (b. 1952), Wang Anyi (b. 1954), and Tie Ning (b. 1957). Three interviewees ranked Zhang Xiaoxian (b. 1969, Hong Kong) as their favourite woman writer. Only one interviewee ranked Wei Hui as her favourite woman writer, while four interviewees ranked Ann Baby as their favourite writer. The other three glam-writers Hong Ying, Mian Mian and Zhao Bo were not listed as favourite writers by the interviewees. Two interviewees said their favourite women writers were Jane Austen and Emily Bronte respectively. Two interviewees did not specify their favourite women writers in the interviews. The interviewees' overall fondness of the glam-writers was noticeably less than that for women writers of older generations. Most of my interviewees recognized the role of the media and publishers in promoting the glam-writers and their works, and showed their respect for the writers of older generations whose *works* had become famous.

Text-reader relationship

To examine how and when women readers started to read the glam-writers' novels, I

asked a set of questions in terms of whose works were read, the time of the first reading and re-reading, the medium of reading (either paperbacks or on the internet), the reasons for reading, the immediate impression of the novels, and influences of the novels, as well as text-specific questions about the characters in the novels, relations between the authors and the characters, interesting themes in the novels, and resonances with readers that emerged in the process of reading.

Among the fifteen interviewees, around half had read Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* and Mian Mian's *Candy*, although these two novels did not leave much impression on the interviewees. Four had read Hong Ying's novels, *Daughter of the River*, *Lord of Shanghai*, and *K*. Only one interviewee had read Zhao Bo's work. More than three interviewees mentioned that they had read another post-70s glam-writer, Zhou Jieru's, novels such as *The Net of a Little Lamia* (Xiaoyao de wang, 2000) and *Are You in Pain* (Ni teng ma, 2000) whose reception I do not deal with in this thesis as she has lived in the U.S. for a number of years, and I focus on writers living and working in mainland China.

Ann Baby seemed to be the most popular writer among the five I discuss in my thesis. Most, if not all, of her works were known and had been read by most of my interviewees. Her eight published novels (which I included in the Introduction) were all mentioned and discussed by my interviewees. There are two main reasons for this. First, Ann Baby was one of the earliest writers to publish her novels and prose on the internet in 1998. At the time when Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's novels began to be published around 2000, Ann Baby had therefore already gained fame by publishing her works on the internet.¹⁹⁰ Although most of my interviewees read paperbacks of Ann Baby's works, she initially became famous among the internet population. She was then 'found' by the publishers, got her novels published in printed form and became more famous immediately after her books were released. Second, due to the

¹⁹⁰ See <http://www.21qbook.com/an.htm>, and <http://book.sina.com.cn/people/annibaobei/index.shtml>, accessed on 2/9/2008.

content of and themes in the novels, Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's books were banned and burned in mainland China in 2000 (Farrer, 2002: 29-34).¹⁹¹ It was not easy to find these two writers' books in bookstores in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu after the banning, except as pirate or underground copies. Instead a great many readers picked up Ann Baby's novels which rose to the top ten best-sellers on the chart of the book sales system and were widely available in bookstores and on the internet.

Apart from four interviewees who had not read these five glam-writers' works, seven out of eleven first read them when they entered university. They read them after they had got some introductory information about the books on websites or through friends' links to their blogs. Some were recommended by flatmates or friends. Only two interviewees read glam-lit novels while at secondary school. They either bought the novels in bookstores or borrowed them from their classmates or friends of the same age who had the novels. School libraries and the internet also provided them with access to these texts. Very few women of this age in my sample chose to read the texts on the internet when they were at secondary school.

At the time when my interviewees went to secondary school, the internet was not as popular as it has since become in the major cities in China. Not everyone could get access to the internet. Even pupils who had computers and broadband at home and whose parents had no restriction on their access to the internet, normally did not spend much time on the internet. Nor did they choose to read novels online. The price of the glam-writers' novels was around RMB16 to 25, which was less than 1% of a family's average monthly income. These books could be bought at a much cheaper price on various websites such as Dangdang and Amazon.¹⁹² Pirate copies were available at an even cheaper price in underground stores or booths. Almost all

¹⁹¹ See http://www.authortrek.com/zhou_wei_hui_page.html, and http://www.authortrek.com/mian_mian_page.html, accessed on 20/09/2008.

¹⁹² See <http://www.dangdang.com>, and <http://www.zhuoyuejoyo.cn/> (also known as www.amazon.cn), accessed on 26/06/2008.

my interviewees could at least in theory afford to buy the paperbacks when they were at school, although many read them only later. There were also examples of buying the books after reading some of the chapters of these novels on the internet.

Although this thesis does not examine how the emergence of online versions of the glam-writers' novels effected the sales of the paperbacks, fewer opportunities for and less popularity of internet use among young people in the 1980s and 1990s certainly contributed to the fact that my interviewees chose to read the texts either through purchasing them in bookstores or borrowing them from libraries or classmates. In answering why they chose to read the actual books of these glam-writers, the interviewees revealed that they enjoyed the feeling of having a book in their hands.

As F1 said:

I bought it because I could not have that kind of feeling if I read it online, especially [Ann Baby's] works. It is not the same sort of thing if you read it online.

You create a sort of atmosphere if you have the book in your hand.

F1 did not explain in detail what 'that kind of feeling' was. However, most interviewees chose to buy or borrow the actual books to read, while only one interviewee read Yi Shu's romance on the internet.¹⁹³ This raises the question of who the actual internet audiences of these texts at the time of their initial publication were. I cannot answer this question but note that my interviewees clearly were not among them.

Different from Wei Hui and Mian Mian who use explicit descriptions of sexual scenes and drug taking in their novels, Ann Baby writes in an ultimately optimistic way so that readers may feel the pain and desperation of the characters, but these characters are also motivated to search for resolutions. The analogous descriptions of the heroines' appearances in almost all Ann Baby's novels have attracted attention from her women readers. As F9 said:

¹⁹³ Yi Shu (b. 1946), based in Hong Kong, one of the most famous women writers who write romances. See <http://www.china.org.cn/english/NM-e/147477.htm>, accessed on 20/09/2008.

... the only influence her novel had on me was, it was pretty to wear sports shoes without wearing socks... So I dared to have a try without consideration on whether it was suitable for me or not. I didn't have the right to buy clothes for myself at that time, except I could choose whether to wear socks or not. It was not up to me whether to buy a cotton skirt or not. The most obvious effect that her novel had on me was that I wore sports shoes without wearing socks. But later I found it more comfortable to wear socks. This is the only aspect in which I might be influenced, and it is negative, unconfident, frail, not strong enough. But I feel confident and strong in all other aspects, so I am not influenced by her in those aspects.

I have to make clear the fact that unlike many students in the western world who undertake part-time jobs while they study, this is not common for the Chinese generation who were born in the 1980s and later. Usually they do not do part-time work during their education. They do not earn money or take up any employment to balance their expenses while they are studying in secondary school or even during higher education. At the time when they first read the glam-writers' works, most if not all of my interviewees did not have the purchaseability to buy whatever they wanted, as they were completely or largely financially dependent on their family. This accounts for F9's comments above.

Although Ann Baby writes about a certain petty-bourgeois lifestyle in her novels like most of the other post-70s glam-writers, she is perhaps the only one who was considered to live a petty-bourgeois way of life in reality. Ann Baby was also regarded as a leader and creator of fashion. As F6 said: 'words such as petty-bourgeois (xiaozi) and decadence only emerged when her books were published. Ann Baby is [like] a flag.' As an exception among the glam-writers, most of Ann Baby's works and her style of writing received positive responses from literary critics and readers on the internet. For example, one reader wrote the following review of Ann Baby's novel *The Lotus* (Lianhua, 2006) on the internet:

Ann Baby's transformation in this novel [*The Lotus*] is closely related to her

journey to the west [part of China] in 2004. Every time I read Ann Baby's [novels], I have a certain kind of gain, either mentally, the story itself, or the way of writing, all of which give us a very genuine solution ... Ann Baby does not provide her readers with the ultimate result of the search, but displays the efforts of each protagonist individually. Readers are encouraged to make their own guesses at the final solution ... Someone once said: 'why don't I understand Ann's works?' In fact, there are some ingredients in Ann Baby's works which are difficult to spell out, especially her mode of thinking is difficult to catch. It does not matter actually. Just like drinking wine, the most enjoyable experience is not getting drunk but drinking an appropriate portion of wine. It is a sort of squiffy feeling, neither muddled nor clear-headed. This kind of enjoyment is rooted in an understanding of and a taste for life ... This is exactly what Ann Baby's works bring to us.¹⁹⁴

F3 may be just one of those readers who did not fully understand Ann Baby's text.

She said to me in the interview:

I am not sure what this book tries to tell us. The lotus is the title of the book. As she says, Motuo is the place where lotus blooms in Buddhist sayings. She talks about Motuo, the isolated and holy place everyone knows. I still can't understand why [she chooses the lotus as the title of the book]. I think lotus is the most appropriate, although I have no clue what she wants to tell us. Besides the journey and the story, I have no idea what she wants to tell us.

Perhaps one of the paragraphs in the novel can partly answer F3's question regarding why the title 'lotus' suits this book. Here Ann Baby compares human life to the lotus:

Some lotuses grow to bloom by striving and stretching towards [their surroundings], while others are submerged by the water and sink into the dark silt. Some lotuses have been close to blossom, and they need more sunshine. In this book, I wrote about the modality of different species of beings, just like writing about different types of death, sufferings, and warmth, their directions,

¹⁹⁴ See <http://baike.baidu.com/view/13678.htm>, accessed on 28/06/2008.

demands and attainable paths.

It is not surprising that Ann Baby's use of the lotus as a metaphor in her novel as well as in the title of her book is not understood by some of her readers such as F3.

However, the readers still like Ann Baby's works despite the fact that they sometimes feel that they do not quite get what the author tries to express in her texts. The desire to understand and be partly understood may provide readers with enough motivation to engage with a text.

Some of the participants in one of her online forums argue that Ann Baby's works do not appeal to mature readers.¹⁹⁵ Secondary-school pupils and college students constitute a large proportion of her readership and forums on the internet (as I observed on Ann Baby's blog and shall discuss in the next chapter). Among Ann Baby's young readers, there are two reading groups worth mentioning. One is constituted by university students who have dreams for the future, but lack practical experience in society. F3 and F13 were both members of this group. The other group includes white-collar workers who inhabit large cities and live a petty-bourgeois way of life (equivalent to middle-class people in the west). Readers in the second group usually have stable jobs and high incomes, living better lives than the average. They like Ann Baby and her novels as they always find resonances in the texts. They identify with the way the characters think and live, the lifestyles the author describes, and the values and attitudes towards life depicted. F7, for instance, said of the glam-writers:

I feel they are very capable. I wonder if I could be a novelist. Her (Ann Baby's) cotton skirt is very nice. The way she wears sports shoes is not bad. I also have them, and like to wear them in the same way.

Although most of the interviewees did not identify themselves much with the life portrayed in the glam-writers' novels, F7 was one of those who admired the glam-writers' lifestyles. She expressed her admiration of these glam-writers in the following way:

¹⁹⁵ See <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=17251407>, accessed on 27/06/2008.

I live their way of life, but don't have their talents. For example, they like to write at night, I also like to sleep late. Friends say that I don't sleep as if I were a writer. I just write articles. I write every day, but do not have a result. I do have similarities to those glam-writers, but now I just admire them.

F7's statement partly shows that women readers do have a clear idea about the difference between themselves and the writers in real life. They are not readily negatively influenced by the glam-writers' texts.

In recalling the most memorable scenes in their favourite glam-writers' novels, both F3 and F7 described touching scenes at the end of Ann Baby's best-known story 'July and Ansheng' (Qiyue yu Ansheng 2000) and her recent novel *Plain Year Bright Time* (Sunian jinshi, 2007), in both of which the male and female protagonists finally get together and live happily ever after. As F7 said:

In the end, it is snowing with snowflakes falling from the sky. July eventually meets the man called Jiaming whom she kept waiting for. They live a peaceful life together. It is still snowing and he holds her in his arms, like the two under one umbrella in a scene in the film *Shanghai Tan*, very cosy. Furthermore, July's forebearing character reflects an image of a traditional Chinese woman who is well prepared to live a peaceful life. Her endurance and patience meet something she's longing for. Very nice.

Although F3 did not describe the final scene in the novel *Plain Year Bright Time* in detail, she felt satisfied with this ending as it met her 'expectation'. F3 also expressed her girlish hope to find her Mr. Right and live a stable life thereafter just as the heroine:

... she [the heroine] finally chose to be with Song Qingyou [the hero]. This ending satisfies my expectation. If it does hint at the writer's real life, I feel glad for her. [If it does not], this ending is consoling too. I hope I can be like her. If her [the writer's] life is not like her book, at least she hopes so. If she has not yet chosen that man, married, settled down, at least she has begun to plan this, to persuade herself to give up something, to live a peaceful and stable life.

F6 spelled out a scene which was described by Ann Baby more than once in several of her novels, and thus became a symbolic setting in the author's novels:

When I was reading her novel, I felt the sky was very dark, in an open tube station. A girl was waiting, wearing cotton clothes, a long cotton skirt, and white sports shoes. The crowd was big, but all vague. Maybe there was someone, a man wearing a checkered shirt. The weather was gloomy and damp, drizzling. This kind of depiction of the environment is typical for her style of writing in the book.

Other than the happy-ending or typical scenes which the author creates in her novels, Ann Baby's novels rarely left a deep impression on the interviewees with regard to the plot. Several interviewees claimed that they had little or no memory of any particular scene in this writer's novels, as they are written in a rather similar way. The scenes and atmosphere created in all of her novels tended to share certain elements, such as snowy, windy or rainy weather, the seven/eleven convenience shop, coffee bars, and the stuffy underground station, etc. As F13 commented: 'as to a particular scene, most of the scenes are alike in all of her books'.

The overall tone of Ann Baby's writing is desperate in the sense that although she does not believe in love, the heroines keep falling in love with different men. They also share certain common traits and appearances. For instance, a thin pale woman with big eyes and long straight hair, wearing a white cotton dress and white sports shoes with naked feet, smoking and drinking, spending time in bars and cafes, sometimes with obvious cuts on her wrists, is representative of the figures in Ann Baby's novels. Too much overlap of the heroines' appearances and experiences across the novels definitely impinges on the plot and the readers' overall memory of the narrative. As F1 said:

What she describes in the book is not a story, which does not easily leave an impression. I did have a deep impression when I was reading it, but I forgot it after a while. You can only remember those with plots.

Compared to Ann Baby, Hong Ying earned her reputation by creating fascinating plots and building conflicts in her novels.¹⁹⁶ Her well-received novels *Daughter of the River*, *K*, and *Lord of Shanghai* are typical in this respect. F10 told a story about how she became interested in Hong Ying's novel immediately after she read *Lord of Shanghai*:

I found the novel really interesting, and the story was well written. Then I wanted to find out whether the story was true or not. But I couldn't find that. There are a lot of people on the internet discussing this book and asking whether this person existed in real life. The name of this person is false, so she can't be found in history. Some people have made a guess about whom this person could possibly be. Finally I found the film and ended up being addicted to it.

This interviewee could not stop talking about certain scenes and conflicts in this novel. Although F11 did not spell out particular scenes which appeared most memorable to her, neither did she consider any characters in Hong Ying's novel *Daughter of the River* her favourite, she made the following comment:

Honestly, I can't remember the concrete scenes [in the book]. However, the whole picture she describes, whenever I think of that book, reminds me of a certain desolate scene, by the Yangtse River, a mother with her children... The characters in this book are not likeable people. They are real people, but not likeable. I cannot say they are likeable, but they made a deep impression on me. ...what attracts me [in this book] is her style of writing, and her own way of looking at this world and destiny. I also searched for Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's books like *Candy* or *Every Good Child Deserves to Eat Candy*. I lost the urge to continue reading after reading several lines. In contrast, I read the beginning of Hong Ying's book [*Daughter of the River*] and finished the whole book. I also want to read her other books, [they are] more of my style.

It is worth mentioning here that both Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's novels *Shanghai Baby* and *We Are Panic* were made into films as *Shanghai Baby* (2007) and

¹⁹⁶ For further information on Hong Ying's novels, see the Introduction.

Shanghai Panic (2001) respectively. However, the films were not very successful.¹⁹⁷ The interviewees hardly knew or showed any interest in those two films, whilst F10 enjoyed the TV drama based on Hong Ying's novel *Lord of Shanghai* (Shanghai wang, 2003). The contrast between the interviewees' responses to Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's works and F10's reaction to Hong Ying's shows a remarkable difference in the reception of these glam-writers' works. Whilst women readers tended to react to Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's texts in an indifferent way, they received Hong Ying's novels well and were eager to comment on them. I should mention that both interviewees F10 and F11 were asked to read Hong Ying's novels before the interview,¹⁹⁸ and that both interviewees thought well of Hong Ying's novels. I did not anticipate any specific responses or outcome of their reading when making the request. Nor did I imply any priority in reading Hong Ying's novels as an exception among the post-70s writers' works. Both women readers mentioned that it made no difference whether reading Hong Ying's and other post-70s glam-writers' novels for leisure or for research purposes in terms of the reception of these texts. The difference in my women readers' responses to Hong Ying's and the other post-70s glam-writers' novels is the distinction between a plot and an atmosphere-driven narrative. Both F10 and F11 mentioned that they liked the former because they found them more memorable. The other post-70s narratives are constructed through reproducing similar things and characters.

Among the themes in the glam-writers' novels, heterosexual relationships remained the most interesting for my interviewees. The interviewees made various comments on this in relation to their own opinions of love and relationship. For instance, F5 told me that:

¹⁹⁷ See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0840375/>, and <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/303207/Shanghai-Panic/overview>, accessed on 13/07/2008.

¹⁹⁸ I asked F10 and F11 to read Hong Ying's novels by e-mail two months before the interviews took place. I did this because I had decided to include Hong Ying in my analysis of the glam-writers' works despite the author's age. Hong Ying was born in 1962, the oldest among the five glam-writers I discuss. However, the author and her works have often been discussed by domestic literary critics in relation to the beauty writer phenomenon. So I felt it necessary to discuss the reception of her works in this thesis too.

I find it most interesting that two persons fall in love very quickly, as if they knew each other before. However, the two usually won't get together eventually. This is a pattern. I think this is also what she wants to express.

While F5 tried to make sense of what she thought the author wanted to express in the novel, F11 shared her view of the glam-writers' intention to depict relationships as follows:

The most interesting theme is the relationship between men and women. It is also one of the inevitable themes in all glam-writers' works. In fact many [readers] care about it very much. By watching how she [the heroine] changes and reacts in a relationship, you can tell how she looks at herself and male characters. To sum up, [what emerges out of the text] is a woman's self-recognition, especially based on her own gender, not any other social role.

The depiction of love relationships dominates the glam-writers' writing and therefore invites most responses from the readers. By offering the above summary, F11 also connected the reader (herself), the text (through the textual other which is the character in this case), and the author of the text. What I infer from her summary is that by depicting a relationship in the text, the author, or maybe the text itself, always brings the reader into dual relationships, an intra-textual relationship between the hero and heroine and an extra-textual relationship between the reader and the text. The gap between the world depicted in the novels and the readers' life in actuality, and between the author's life and the characters' lives thus constitutes Pearce's term *the textual other*, which enables the reader to engage with the text and to find the self through reading.

The focus of my discussion here has returned to the relationship between the reader, the text and the author. While the chapter focuses on the relationship between the reader and the text, and the readers' views of the glam-writers, I also noticed that there was a constant engagement with the relation between the author and the construction of the character in the novel. In articulating their views of the relation between the author and the heroine, most interviewees offered quite similar opinions.

For example, F5 said:

I think writers more or less have reflections of themselves in their writings. Many characters are created for the sake that she [the author] wants to be that person or she wants to do [what that person does in the novel]. Otherwise there may be writers' personal experiences in it, more or less.

F9 made a similar comment by saying:

I think it is what she [the writer] likes or she wants to become. It is certainly not appropriate to change in real life. The easiest way is to create such a person in the novel, let her live a certain life, wear a certain brand of clothes, use certain perfume, and do whatever she wants her to do. I think it is to satisfy her [the writer's] own desires.

The readers interpreted the novels as forms of wish-fulfillment on the part of the authors. They saw a direct connection between the authors and their texts, either in terms of the articulation of authorial fantasy or in terms of the fictionalization of the authorial self. As discussed in the Introduction, most of the glam-writers' works were written in an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical form. The interviewees validated their explanations of the relation between authors and characters by inferring the author's intention and desire in writing.

As far as the influences of the glam-writers' novels on their readers are concerned, I wondered before conducting the interviews how or indeed if my interviewees had felt influenced by these texts. When I myself read novels such as *Shanghai Baby*, *Candy*, and *Goodbye Vivian* at the age of seventeen, I was shocked by the explicit sexual scenes and drug-and-alcohol-taking portrayed in their texts, as it was the first time in my life that I came into contact with taboo topics in texts produced by women just ten years older than I. Based on my own experience of reading these texts during my adolescence, I had assumed that young Chinese women of my age might have perceived a certain influence of these novels on them at the time of reading.

In the interviews, a great proportion of the interviewees said that the glam-writers' works had influenced them to some extent at a certain stage of their lives, but then

the impact had faded or was substituted by the impact of other readings. This was especially apparent in the women readers who worked after obtaining their first degrees. In recalling their reading experience when they were pupils, most women said that the impact of the glam-writers' works upon them during the high school years reduced to little or even disappeared after they started to work. Even Ann Baby's work, which supposedly caused significant emotional responses in her readers at the time of reading, did not leave a sustained impact on my interviewees.

As F7 stated:

After I read it (Ann Baby's novel) for the first time, I felt it was really great... The work may not affect you, but your mood is similar to that described in the work. So you feel there is a resonance between you and the author. Maybe you feel you have been immersed in that feeling for a certain period, if you have experienced bad luck or frustrations in a relationship, the feeling may last longer. However, the work does not have a sustained influence on most people, except those with weaker minds.

F14 also articulated the fading impact of Ann Baby's novels on her: 'there were certainly some words or sentences which moved me, but now they have less impact on me.'

Among readers' perceptions of the impact which these writers' works had upon them, several factors contributed to determining the extent to which the readers were influenced. Age was the first and one of the most important factors, not only because my interviewees recognized that reading at different ages played an important role in determining their responses to these works, but also because of the fact that two of my undergraduate interviewees reported being more influenced by the glam-writers' works than the older interviewees. For instance, twenty-one-year old interviewee F3 said of Ann Baby's works that 'her work has changed my way of looking at life'.

Although twenty-two-year old F13 did not think that there was as much influence of Ann Baby's texts on her as F3, she told me that her classmate's view of the world had been changed by Ann Baby.

Such perceptions and responses changed as the readers' personal experiences, views of the world and value systems moved on. For example, F7 said:

The younger you are, the more you will be influenced by the works. That's why many people hold the view that children are not allowed to read some writers' works...People may more or less have problems if they read more stories of this kind. However, as you grow up gradually, you learn more things. You get less influenced by the novels and may only be influenced temporarily.

F11's narrative of changes in her views of these works indicated the effects of age and personal growth on the reception of the glam-writers' novels:

I think all the novels must have exerted more or less influence on me. The changes these novels brought to me were very big immediately after the reading. You might not get yourself out [of the novel]. Then gradually you might get yourself out a little, and understand things more rationally...This has certain effects on me, as I have been educated purely in terms of right and wrong, black and white, since childhood. I find it more and more difficult to judge a thing either black or white. I may gradually blur the line between right and wrong. My views of the world and values have been somewhat influenced by such narratives.¹⁹⁹

Similar to age, context and personal circumstances were also important factors in the readers' reception of the glam-writers' works. F1 told me about her different experiences of reading Ann Baby's and Hong Huang's²⁰⁰ work at different stages of her life, which were her university time in the UK and the employment period in China after she graduated from a UK university:

Hong Huang's *Aimless Beautiful Life* completely changed my way of life both in the UK and now, just like a watershed. Ann Baby's works which I previously read were decadent and ambivalent, while Hong Huang was a realist...I have been

¹⁹⁹ F11 was my high-school classmate. Her parents were both teachers. She therefore received a very traditional and conservative education from her intellectual family in her childhood. Then she found herself a little changed through various readings.

²⁰⁰ Hong Huang (b. 1961), publisher, granddaughter of famous literary scholar Zhang Shizhao, and ex-wife of the film director Chen Kaige. Her recently published novels are *Aimless Beautiful Life* (Wumudi meihao shenghuo, 2007) and *My Abnormal Life* (Wo de feizhengchang shenghuo, 2007).

very busy every day since I returned to China. If I still lived in the way I did in the UK, the way of life which Ann Baby described, it would not be compatible with my life now.

F1 indicated a significant change in her life in this narrative. She was my university classmate and friend when we studied at the University of East Anglia. I knew that she used to be a fan of Ann Baby's works and that she lived the same life as other overseas Chinese students in the UK. In order to find out how she perceived the effect of location on her experience of reading, I asked her whether she would have continued to read Ann Baby's works if she were in the UK. She insisted that she would still read Ann Baby's work if she had stayed in the UK, as she would have difficulty in understanding Hong Huang's works without living and working in China. She further explained her different perceptions of Ann Baby's novels before and after she returned to work in China:

I was unsure about my life at that time [in the UK]. I wondered whether I was abnormal, different from others. After reading her [Ann Baby's] books, I found she was like me. So I felt I was normal. I found a balance. I did not mean I was getting close to her, but she affirmed me and made me affirm my life. The positive influence she had on me was to affirm myself at that phase. When I read *The Lotus*, I found the author seemed to change her way of writing. Not like the way I read her previous novels. I spent two or three months reading *The Lotus*. I felt I had moved far away from her path. I can perceive a change in her book as well as in her. Compared to her previous way of writing, they are two completely different worlds. I can no longer understand what she tries to express in her works now. What affirms me now is another person's work, Hong Huang. This is also influenced by my age and environment.

Among interviewees who had read the glam-writers works and perceived a certain influence of these works, most regarded such an influence as temporal and limited. The interviewees recognized the superficiality and brevity of the impact of the glam-writers' works upon them, an impact which was also determined and mediated by

external factors such as changes in age, environment and personal/real-life circumstances.

Personal/real-life experience

As Iser observes:

literature simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it. He can step out of his own world and enter another, where he can experience extremes of pleasure and pain without being involved in any consequences whatsoever (1989: 29).

A reader's personal experience is a crucial factor not only in influencing or changing the reader's way of looking at and doing things, but also in guiding and directing the reader to read and respond to literary works. When asked about their attitudes towards the lifestyles described in the glam-writers' works which were characterized as bourgeois and decadent, most interviewees did not share the opinions or lifestyles portrayed. Several interviewees expressed their indifference to such lifestyles and stated that living such a lifestyle might only be a must-do at a certain stage of these glam-writers' lives. For instance, F9 said:

I do not resist their lifestyles, but I am not able to live their way of life. If conditions allowed me to buy food and nice clothes without work, I certainly would do that...To me, I think their way of life is good, because I have not accomplished it yet. If I accomplished that, I would certainly have thought the same way.

F7 offered her own explanation of why the glam-writers portrayed a decadent way of life by saying that:

I accept it because they succeed to live this way of life without choices...The environment they live in determines what kind of persons they are. To put it another way, in certain periods of life they inevitably have to experience this phase. It is only a phase, and they will eventually break away from this lifestyle. It will end some day.

F8 made an interesting point by questioning how and where these writers got money from if they did not work:

It is not bad to have money without having to work. Everyone envies that.

However, you may have to pay other things instead. Let's forget about it. Having a job is more reliable. Even if I can have a lot of money without having to work, I won't do those things [which the glam-writers talk about in their novels]. I will spend [money] on other things.

However, younger interviewees such as F13 who was an undergraduate expressed their different attitudes towards that lifestyle:

I want to experience their lifestyle too, although I am a student now. If I have a job in the future or can become bourgeois, I also want to live a life like that. I want to have that kind of experience. I do not resist this way of life. Instead, I have been yearning towards it, since there is a lot of description in the book, which I think is a sort of temptation. As to going to the pub, I have never been to the pub. I want to know what's going on in a pub.

Different from the younger interviewees, white-collar women workers such as F1 and F6 who had stable jobs and incomes, had experience of spending night time with friends and colleagues in bars and pubs. F1 told me that she went to the pubs 'every day or two', 'usually with colleagues and friends', and to 'drink, play games and chat'. F6 had similar experiences: 'I usually go there every day or two, with colleagues and friends. In Xuzhou I dare not go to that place [pub] alone. I drink alcohol, play games, dance, and watch handsome men.'

Whilst readers with simpler, less bourgeois life experiences, such as undergraduates F3 and F13 who had not had any employment, hoped to experience what they had not yet had in real life, readers with such experiences like all the other working women, wished to identify with the author, with certain common experiences which they shared with the author, and even escape from reality through reading. My older interviewees usually wanted a peaceful life rather than investing too much in the

hustle and bustle of their careers. F4 for example said:

I was very busy when I used to work, and I did not have much spare time. After I quit the job, I had plenty of time to do what I liked to, such as housework, jogging with my dog, and shopping. I hope to start a family and live a happy life. I also hope to have my children reared in a good environment, and hope they are healthy and happy. I plan to get married soon.

F15 also said:

To be honest, I am not sure about the detailed plan as I'm afraid I can't accomplish it. Sometimes I just don't want to think about it. There will be many unexpected circumstances. So I don't think too much, and I just do my job well now.

Although my interviewees did not give reasons why they hoped to live a peaceful life without setting specific goals for their careers, pressure from and competition in Chinese women's employment left them little chance to think of other things than work. The fact that most of the older interviewees expressed their wishes to get married and start a family shows that contemporary Chinese white-collar women face the double pressures of both work and getting married. Their actual life situation meant that these readers saw themselves as hardly influenced by the glam-literature at all, and constructed a strong contrast between the women readers' lived experiences and the characters' lives described in the glam-writers' novels. These texts then portray a very small proportion of young and marginalized women's lives in the metropolis – in a sense the characters do not represent mainstream Chinese women - and contradict most ordinary women's life patterns. Besides a common interest in music and taking alcohol on occasion, none of the interviewees had any experience of taking drugs. Almost all of my interviewees had a conservative attitude towards sex and relationships. Only two of my interviewees said that they had had casual sex with men other than their boyfriends, including one who became the girlfriend of her partner after the sex. It seems that my interviewees were neither much influenced by the novels nor by the lifestyles described in the novels.

Online interaction and blog participation

I also asked my interviewees to give details of their participation on the glam-writers' blogs. None of the interviewees listed these glam-writers' blogs as their favourite or most visited blogs. Only four interviewees had been to Ann Baby's blog, while only one had been to Wei Hui's, Mian Mian's and Hong Ying's blogs respectively. Most of the interviewees did not regard the quality of the glam-writers' blogs as high, and many had never thought of visiting the glam-writers' blogs. While my interviewees rarely left messages or comments on these writers' blogs, they thought it a common phenomenon for writers to set up blogs as a platform to communicate with their readers. They also showed an understanding of the celebrities' blog phenomenon by declaring which writers they were fans of and recognizing that there was fandom of these writers. Among the fifteen interviewees, only two did not write their own blogs. I shall discuss the writers' blog phenomenon in detail in the next chapter.

My sample represents a particular group of Chinese women readers who came from economically advanced geographical areas and had a higher than average educational/professional background. Among the working interviewees, most worked in metropolitan cities such as Shanghai, Zhuhai and Suzhou, and earned relatively higher incomes. Women who lived or worked in Shanghai responded differently to the glam-writers' works and lifestyles described in the novels than those who worked in other cities such as Xuzhou and Changzhou. This may have resulted from a common experience in location (Shanghai and various parts in Shanghai in this case) where readers such as F4 and F14, and glam-writers such as Ann Baby, Mian Mian and Wei Hui shared a certain geographical and socio-cultural awareness and knowledge. In sum, this chapter does not and cannot reflect the overall phenomenon of Chinese women's reception of the glam-writers' works. The reception of these works by those who come from less advanced places and have poorer education, for example, may be quite different.

While Pearce discusses her 'privileged position as researcher and commentator' in

her professional practice of 'othering' the text/textual practice as well as 'othering' her participants (1997: 190), I was also aware of the fact that my privileged position as a researcher might be an obstacle in preventing my interviewees from revealing their actual opinions of the glam-writers' texts, due to various concerns such as anxiety of being an *other* by disclosing different views or an inclination towards certain lifestyles which might not be identified with by most young women in China. In my fieldwork, I tried my best to keep my own interpretation and the extent to which I engaged myself with the texts to a minimum.

To find out how women in their late teens and early twenties receive works by women in their late twenties and early thirties at the time of writing, and how women readers perceive the impact of the glam-writers - who are about one decade older than the readers - and their literary production, is to try to understand what role contemporary Chinese women's literature has played in the perception and interpretation of life by young women readers in mainland China. That young women are not readily negatively influenced by the glam-writers' works therefore contradicts the mainstream Chinese literary critics' monolithic views of these texts and their negative impacts on the readers (which I illustrated in the previous chapter).

Pearce's term 'the textual other' relates to the dialectic between text and reader, as well as the extra-textual factors such as age and context, which play a role in the reader's reception of these works. Women readers such as F1 and F11 considered factors such as age or personal circumstances at a certain period of their lives as predominant in determining the way and to what extent the glam-writers' works had influenced them. Different from interviewees F3 and F13 who were both undergraduates articulating a profound influence which Ann Baby's novels had upon them, working women like F1 and F9 had been less influenced by the glam-writers' works and only for a certain period. This, then, is partly a lifecycle issue.

My research shows that women at different ages had different perceptions of these

glam-writers' works. Just like the way in which heroines, or perhaps the glam-writers too, defined themselves in these texts, how women readers perceived the impact of these novels was in part determined by the age of the readers. The younger a reader was, the more easily she seemed to be influenced by the works. But such influence was usually short-lived and contradicted the anxiety of influence implied by the temporary banning of these works and mainstream literary critics in mainland China. Besides age, location and personal circumstances all impacted upon the readers' reception of this particular type of literature. Although most interviewees did not identify with the lifestyles described in many of the glam-writers' novels, they also showed an understanding of the bourgeois way of life, and a willingness to experience such lifestyles if conditions allowed them to. Most of the white-collar women workers expressed a contrasting attitude towards the life of the glam-writers whose works they had read, such as their views of marriage, family and career. Overall, the glam-writers' novels did not have much influence on the young Chinese women readers I interviewed, their world views and value systems, although younger interviewees were, at the time of reading, temporarily influenced by these glam-writers' works in terms of their not-yet-accomplished dreams and somewhat vague goals for the future. On the whole they did not rate these works highly in literary terms and did not show sustained interest in them.

I shall now explore the ways in which readers participate and engage with the glam-writers and their works on the writers' blogs. As a platform of communication, the writers' blogs offer insights into how the glam-writers promote themselves and readers respond to them. I shall demonstrate the means by which the text-reader relationship just discussed moves back into an author-reader relationship in relation to the online reception of the glam-writers' texts.

Chapter 6: The Reception of the Chinese Glam-Writers' Works on the Writers' Blogs

In the previous chapters I have analysed the reception of the glam-writers' works by both literary critics as professional readers and women readers as lay readers in offline contexts. Now I shall investigate how these glam-writers and their works have been projected and received by virtual participants on the writers' personal blogs since their establishment in 2005. My focus in researching the glam-writers' blogs is on the reception of their works by means of observing readers' engagement with, and their participation in, the writers' blogs. I pay particular attention to the 'Comment' and 'Message' sections on the blogs since readers can comment on the blog entries and leave personal messages to the writers there. Thus I shall first examine the ways in which the glam-writers have established, maintained and updated their blogs, discussing the nature and function of the blogs and the writers' active role in influencing the reception of their works on their blogs. Second, I shall analyse how readers respond to, interact and communicate with the writers and build a certain 'intimacy' between themselves and the writers by revealing their own experiences and life narratives in the 'Comment' and 'Message' sections of the writers' blogs. Finally I shall explore some of the implications and impacts of the writers' blog phenomenon as a form of celebrity culture, reflecting upon how these glam-writers blur the boundaries between the public and the private, and shift public attention from their literary works to themselves as celebrities and private individuals.

Internet technology has penetrated our everyday life in both developed and developing countries, resulting in a pervasive dissemination of information and communication among those individuals who are able to access the internet. By 2003 China had 80 million households with access to the internet, second only to the U.S. with 166 million home internet users (Fung, 2006: 130). The 'extreme development' of the internet in China in the past decade has not only foregrounded a cyberculture

which 'flourishes in an environment with well-connected broadband service at home and school' (ibid), but also made possible and popular the virtual interaction and communication among people from different geographical locations. The impact of the internet on individuals and the society is tremendous. For instance, it is now possible for anyone who has stable access to the internet to have a blog and network with people all over the world, most of whom are unknown to them in real life. It is also possible for those with basic writing and typing skills to become competent bloggers provided they maintain and keep blogging on a regular basis.

The term weblog, or blog, its shortened form, was first coined by John Barger in 1997 in the U.S. Technically, a blog is a series of posts arranged in reverse chronological order and updated on a regular basis.²⁰¹ Modern blogs essentially evolved from online diaries and journals. As a new online form of self-publishing and social communication, blogs create a space where everyone can write, publish, and be seen and commented on, provided one has internet access and sets blog permissions open to the public. The establishment of personal blogs (as a new form of self-presentation and expression, slightly differing from personal home pages) means that the internet and the cyberspace it has created, can 'enrich and transform individuals' processes of self-formation' (Slevin, 2000: 166).

A variety of studies have been conducted on the blog and cyberspace from an array of perspectives in the west. For example, McNeill (2003) compares two forms of self-expression, online diaries and blogs, expressing her dismay at the over-exposure of one's private life on the blog and the irrelevance of one's everyday life to other people. Drezner and Farrell (2004) point to the underestimated global influences of blogs on journalism and policy-making regarding the immediate responses blogs can spark about big events. Blumenthal proposes an open-source methodology to evaluate traditional polling and survey methods on the internet, articulating the blogosphere as a 'new forum for commentary' (2005: 655). More recent studies of

²⁰¹ See <http://weblogs.about.com/od/blogginbasics/p/whatisblog.htm>, accessed on 12/10/2007.

blogs have also focused on their educational use in classroom settings (Boling and Castek 2008; West 2008; Witte 2007). Although academic research on blogs has just begun to be carried out in China (Zhou Yongming 2005), little has been done to explore the reception of writers' works in the blogosphere. My aim in this chapter is therefore to investigate readers' responses to the glam-writers and their works through their active engagement with the writers' blogs.

The Rise of Celebrities' Blogs in China

Officially, blogs were not launched in mainland China until 2002. The word *blog* was translated as *boke* in Chinese by Fang Xingdong and Wang Junxiu in July 2002.²⁰² They then launched the first Chinese blog website, www.blogchina.com, in the following month. At the time the number of people in China who wrote blogs, known as bloggers, was less than ten thousand. This figure increased sharply to 200,000 one year later. By the year 2005, the proportion of Chinese bloggers had reached ten percent of all netizens.²⁰³ The major Chinese blog websites are 51, Bolaa, Blogcn, Bokee, Sohu, and Sina.²⁰⁴ Among them, Sohu and Sina²⁰⁵ are the biggest and most popular portals which provide news, search engines, mobile services, movie/music directories, chatrooms, e-commerce, e-shopping, cyber communities, games, free e-mail and blog spaces.²⁰⁶ As a leading online medium and directory service provider for Chinese users all over the world, Sina has more than 230 million registered users worldwide, and a site browsing flow-in rate of more than 700 million every day.²⁰⁷

Sina is one of the largest commercial websites in China, aimed at creating as much commercial success and as many business opportunities as it can. The establishment of celebrities' blogs manifests the alliance of personalities with the

²⁰² See <http://www.zjol.com.cn/05biz/system/2007/09/28/008840235.shtml>, accessed on 10/09/2007.

²⁰³ See http://www.ce.cn/life/zhuanti/2006/bkixs/wh/200603/08/t20060308_6306763.shtml, accessed on 7/11/2007.

²⁰⁴ The full website addresses are www.51.com, <http://www.bolaa.com>, www.blogcn.com, www.bokee.com, <http://blog.sohu.com/>, and <http://blog.sina.com.cn>.

²⁰⁵ The full website address of Sohu and Sina is www.sohu.com, and www.sina.com.

²⁰⁶ See <http://baike.baidu.com/view/9803.htm>, accessed on 7/11/2007.

²⁰⁷ See http://corp.sina.com.cn/chn/sina_intr.html, accessed on 7/11/2007.

Sina website, and thus produces more media hype and promotional effects for the website. On one level, the Sina website owners benefit from an enormous number of hits and the advertising effect of this. On another, personalities may be more likely to gain fame and readers by launching their blogs on a highly influential Chinese website such as Sina. Blogging is thus mutually beneficial for both the celebrities and the site owners.

Sina column editors, especially those in charge of blog maintenance and development, have taken pains to invite celebrities from all professions, including politics, banking and finance, stocks and estates, IT, academia, arts and literature, entertainment (music, film, TV), sports, and the like, to join and set up their personal blogs on the Sina site (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/>). The total number of blogs set up on the Sina website is over seven million, including ten thousand celebrities' blogs and more than nine hundred writers' blogs.²⁰⁸ According to the chief editor of Sina, Chen Tong, the number of Sina elite blogs is more than 3,000 to date (2007). Hundreds of these blog authors are well-known film and TV stars, spokesmen/women, singers, established column editors and writers.²⁰⁹ Among them is the group of young women writers that includes Ann Baby, Hong Ying, Mian Mian, Wei Hui, and Zhao Bo. In the following section I shall outline the ways in which these writers formulate the content and style of their blogs and render their blogs a tool for self-promotion. Since they all established their Sina blogs after 2005,²¹⁰ I primarily focus on the blog entries and interactions on their blogs during the period between 2005 and 2009.

The Form and Content of the Glam-Writers' Blogs

Since all the glam-writers whose works I discussed established their blogs on Sina, the structure and layout of the blogs are provided and predetermined by the Sina templates. Although individual writers have a choice of design or may slightly change

²⁰⁸ See <http://yiluxiaopao.space.170.com/Blog/ShowDetailArticle.aspx?ArticleID=14222>, accessed on 04/10/2007.

²⁰⁹ See <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/3956978.html>, accessed on 11/10/2007.

²¹⁰ See Appendix 4 of the Chinese glam-writers' mini-biographies.

the layout of the blog page according to their own interests, a standard structure of the first page usually contains the following preset sub-sections, as shown in Figure 6.1.²¹¹ Figure 6.2 represents a summary of what can be found on these blogs in terms of layout and content (my translation).

²¹¹ The first page of Mian Mian's blog on Sina was accessed and saved on 10/6/2009. Figure 1 was not the complete version of the first page. Normally one would see all of it through scrolling.

Figure 6.1: The First Page of Mian Mian's Blog.



Source: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/mianmian>, accessed on 10/6/2009.²¹²

²¹² As writers such as Mian Mian keep updating their blogs, the first page on which the latest entry is displayed is always in a changing shape. Sometimes the glam-writers also make changes to the theme of their blogs. This version of Mian Mian's blog site was accessed and printed on 10/6/2009. The attached list is an illustration of how the Sina blog model functions.

Figure 6.2: Generic Representation of the Layout and Content of the Glam-Writers' Blogs.

Title of the Blog and Blogger URL: http://blog.sina.com.cn/nameofauthor > subscribe	
Toolbar Blogs > Photo Album > Music > Video > Information Centre First Page > Blog Entries > Add to Favourite > Blog Image	
Personal Information Self Portrait (Add as Friend) (Send a Note) (Leave a Message) (What's New) Blog Level Blog Points Hit Counter	<u>Main Blog Space</u> Name of the Post Date of Publication Tag (key words of the text) Abstract of Text Click Here For the Complete Text Read> Comment> Add to Favourite> Print> Report
Notice Board	
Categories of Posts	
Latest Comments	
Latest Messages	
Visitor Logs	
Photo Album	
Multimedia (music and video player)	
Friends' Link	
Calendar	
Customized Links	

Note: The display of each writer's website may have slightly different arrangements, but the structure of the blog pages remains principally the same. The system was updated by the Sina maintenance team at the beginning of 2009, and kept changing in the following months.

Based on different emphases, interests and intentions, the glam-writers choose particular sections and options provided by the Sina templates as shown above, to map their blog sites. Those writers who do not want to receive unwanted or unauthorized comments, such as Ann Baby and Zhao Bo, do not authorize the Comment option to be open to the public. Apart from Zhao Bo, the other four writers discussed in this chapter do not upload video clips onto the blogs. Four display their personal photographs in the self-portrait section. Although Ann Baby's portrait is not shown in this section, she inserted her self-portraits into her early blog entries dated

December 1, 2005²¹³ and June 2, 2006.²¹⁴ The former entry introduces her biography and all of her publications to September 2007, when her latest novel *The Plain Year Bright Time* (Sunian jinshi, 2007) was published. The latter is a statement about her Sina blog, announcing her reasons for setting up the blog.

The five glam-writers' blogs share a number of similarities. First, brief information about the writer's books and publications including purchase channels is presented on the blog's first page, usually in the notice-board section. Second, text accompanied by the writers' personal photographs is seen on almost every glam-writer's blog. Third, the writers tend to post book reviews and commentaries by established critics on their blogs. Fourth, they upload music onto their blogs and set it as the background sound. When the first page of the blog is opened, the background music plays automatically and creates a certain atmosphere for the readers to engage further with the textual and visual content of the blog. Last but not least, readers contribute a lot to the writers' blogs by regularly visiting them, adding comments on the entries and leaving messages for the writers, even though the writers' responses to the readers are relatively fewer, which I shall discuss later, with regard to writer-reader interactions in the Message section.

The similarities shared by these writers are not only reflected through the form of the blogs, but are also displayed in terms of the content. In examining the relationship between personal characters and digital technology, Paasonen points out that personal websites 'depict and simultaneously give shape to one's persona through various textual, visual, and audio elements' (2005: 87). This is also the case for the blogs I investigate. By constructing autobiographical texts, publishing personal photographs, and making use of audio-visual media technologies such as uploading music and videos on their blogs, the glam-writers maintain their blogs in a more or

²¹³ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f80010000ue.html, accessed on 26/11/2007. I noticed the date on which this entry was written was more than one and a half years earlier than the latest novel was published. Thus I infer that the list of publications was kept updated as soon as this writer's new books came out.

²¹⁴ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f80010004ax.html, accessed on 26/11/2007.

less similar way by producing their self 'through acts of narration' (ibid: 103), i.e. producing autobiographical narratives or snapshots of their moods, emotions, feelings, experiences, relationships, and everyday lives. One might describe this as a form of self-commodification by the writers.

The glam-writers all make an effort to promote their blogs by revealing personal trivia. Writers who in a seemingly transparent fashion disclose their private details in the blog entries, seem to attract more readers' attention than those who do not reveal much about their personal lives (as I shall show in the examples below). Of course, it is not easily possible to ascertain the veracity of what they reveal. Despite the 'initial impetus' (Schau and Gilly, 2003: 392) of making themselves 'unique' (Passonen, 2005: 87) by various means of self-exposure, the writers' act of disclosing the personal on their blogs in a similar and simultaneous way undercuts the uniqueness of their blogs. They effectively sell themselves as commodities to the consumers who regularly visit their blogs, through textual exposures of themselves, including part of their personal lives.

This also applies to the writers' act of posting their personal photographs, both recent and older, on their blogs. Entries with writers' personal photographs, either of themselves or inserted for illustrating purposes, seem to be more frequently visited and commented on by the readers. The blogs of Zhao Bo, Hong Ying and Ann Baby have been assessed as among the top fifteen excellent writers' blogs by Sina's reading channel, *dushu pindao*.²¹⁵ By disclosing themselves textually (by writing personal stories) and visually (by publishing personal photographs), the *personal* of the writers becomes a commodity on display in the public domain. The boundary between the public and the private is therefore blurred by the writers' act of blogging.

What I want to re-emphasize here before elaborating how the writers and their works have been received on the blogs, is that individuality, as suggested by both

²¹⁵ See <http://book.sina.com.cn/blog/famauthor.shtml>, accessed on 6/11/2007.

representing the self on the blog and being a celebrity, is undercut by the writers' choice of setting up blogs on the same hosting site, Sina. On the one hand, each writer is confined to representing herself on similar templates due to 'the [same] structural features of blogs and the nature of interactions' (Doostdar, 2004: 655) taking place on the blogs. The writers become templated, following recognizable patterns. On the other hand, blogs are becoming the site where writers as celebrities promote the self by disclosing aspects of their personal lives in public. As Marshall observes:

Celebrities provide a topic for continuous discussions about the individual and the meaning of individuality in contemporary culture, about the location of the line between public and private, and about the significance of their actions for an audience (2006: 502).

According to Marshall, there are at least three parts that constitute a celebrity culture: the celebrities' individual actions, the exchange between the celebrities and audiences and the audience's identification. The blog seems to meet all three functions, offering a platform of interaction and communication to both writers and readers. What plays the central role in the operation of both blogging and celebrity culture is the disclosure of the *personal*. Thus celebrity produces 'an eerily similar discourse to blogs and webcams' in light of 'the extra-textual dimensions of the public persona' which are about 'discourses of revelation of the private self' (ibid: 639).

Marshall argues that 'revelation of the private and the personal is the central narrative-like pattern of the ways in which celebrities are viewed by the public' (ibid: 502). The kind of personal information one finds on the writers' blogs are about aspects of their personal lives such as whom they meet and where they travel, and improvisational thoughts and feelings they disclose at a superficial level. The content of the writers' blogs remains fragmentary, offering at best partial insights into either the writers' literary works or focal moments in their lives.

Whereas McNeill sees online diaries as 'assertions of identity, and arguments for the importance of an individual's life', making 'very personal connections to a reading

audience that recognizes and confirms these individual life assertions' (2003: 26), I would contend that the glam-writers' blogs do not strongly function as 'expressions of personality' (Paasonen, 2005: 86) and 'sites of direct and transparent self-expression and self-exploration' (ibid: 102). They embody other significances and complexities such as self-promotion apart from the traditionally assumed functions of the blog (e.g. exchanging information, publishing and disseminating news, and building forums or communities). As an interactive and conversational activity which diverges from the traditional genre of diary writing as 'private and monologic' (McNeill, 2003: 27), the establishment of the glam-writers' blogs reflects 'the needs and interests of both writer and reader' (ibid: 29) in more impersonal ways. In the following section, I shall offer an overview of what the glam-writers disclose on their blogs and how the readers react to this. I shall further analyse the extent to which the readers engage with the literary works and other aspects of the writers on their blogs.

Readers' Engagement with the Glam-Writers' Blogs

The writers' blogs first of all serve as a tool for book promotions. Apart from providing information of, and links to, their novels in the specific section on the first page, quoting transcripts of past interviews with established print media and pasting excerpts of published or unpublished novels as the main content of a blog entry are the common strategies adopted by the glam-writers. For instance, Ann Baby promotes her work by adding prefaces to, and the table of contents of, the book *Rosebush Island* (Qiangwei daoyu, 2002),²¹⁶ and offering background information about the novel *The Lotus* (Lianhua, 2006) and its writing context on her blog.²¹⁷ Hong Ying selects certain parts of her interview transcripts in Shanghai regarding the publication of her novel *Shanghai Magician* (Shanghai moshushi, 2006), and publishes them in the entry on October 16, 2007.²¹⁸ Zhao Bo posts several excerpts from her previous novels such as *Beijing Water* (Beijing liushui, 2005) and *The Dew on the Road* (Lushang de lu, 2003). In the same way, Mian Mian published excerpts

²¹⁶ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f80010000vm.html, accessed on 16/6/2009.

²¹⁷ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f8001000332.html, accessed on 16/6/2009.

²¹⁸ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa0100078c.html, accessed on 15/6/2009.

from her new book *Notorious* (Shengming langji, 2008) from 16 to 23 August 2008,²¹⁹ which had not yet been published at the time that she wrote the entries.

Almost all the entries attracted immediate responses from the readers after publishing. Most of them were brief and ostensibly complimentary. 'Great', 'intelligent woman', 'I support you' and 'I love your books' are the most common types of commentaries that readers make on the blogs. Serious textual analysis of the literary works remains very limited, if at all. It is possible to access certain quantitative information for each entry to understand the frequency with which readers engage with the entries. Below each blog entry, there are three statistics in the form of hypertext as shown below:²²⁰

[阅读 \[Read\] \(566\)](#)|[评论 \[Comment\] \(24\)](#)|[收藏 \[Add to Favourite\] \(0\)](#)|[打印 \[Print\]](#) |[举报 \[Report\]](#)

The first figure next to the *Read* button shows the times that blog entry page was opened and visited, the second near the *Comment* button indicates the total number of comments the writer received for that entry, and the third represents the times that the entry was saved as a favourite by others. The difference in the numbers of hits in part reflects readers' identification with the writers and the extent to which these writers' texts are popular among the readers who have access to their blogs. Flat blog titles with little to catch the viewer's eye prove difficult to attract readers' attention. This is most evident in Zhao Bo's blog entry. Compared to other entries, the number of hits for an entry with striking words such as 'beauty writers' and 'rape' in its title was enormous, reaching over nine thousand, ten times or more than other entries within the same month.²²¹

There are at least two ways in which readers can respond to, and interact with, the

²¹⁹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb10100avn.html, and

http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb10100ay2p.html, accessed on 16/6/2009.

²²⁰ This statistic was taken from one of Mian Mian's blog entries dated April 18, 2006 at

http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb1010002x8.html, accessed on 18/6/2009.

²²¹ The figure was accessed at the time of revising this chapter in June 2009. See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d0100em2p.html?retcode=0, accessed on 11/6/2009.

writers on the blogs. First, on most blogs it is possible to make comments on each entry. The Comment option is open to anyone who wants to make comments on a particular entry. The only exception is if the authors set the Comment option off. Three writers do this: Ann Baby, Wei Hui and Zhao Bo. Ann Baby did not allow this option at the beginning of writing her blog. Zhao Bo closed this section in the middle of 2006. Wei Hui's Comment section is no longer accessible due to her shutting down the blog. Hong Ying and Mian Mian have been allowing this option ever since they set up the blogs. Second, readers can also engage with the writers by leaving personal messages in the Message section. In order to make comments or leave messages for the writers who do not allow the Comment option, readers must register with the Sina site and become official Sina bloggers. Only a registered Sina blogger can leave messages on the Sina blogs by clicking the *Leave Me A Message* button on the toolbar or in the dynamic zone on the first page.²²² I shall return to discuss the readers' engagement in the Message section later.

Based on my observation of the Comment and Message sections on the glam-writers' blogs during the periods between August and October 2007, and between May and July 2009, the major types of the readers' responses on these blogs fall into four categories according to the most frequently made comments:

- Enquiries about the writers' personal lives including relationships, scandals, workload, health, leisure, hobby and interest, and life plan
- Enquiries about the writers' works and publications, book purchase channels, and other publication-related matters.
- Confessions of personal experiences and life narratives, and solution-seeking requests for personal desires and anxieties
- Enquiries about the writers' blogs including questioning the authenticity of the texts written by the writers and technical problems in terms of maintaining the blogs (e.g. many readers asked Ann Baby about the background music on her

²²² The current version of the Sina blog has been updated several times since 2006. The layout of the first page has changed significantly from its original version, but the Message option has always been available for readers who want to leave personal messages for the authors.

blog and how to add it to their own blogs)

The main themes of the comments and messages by the readers were related to their personal lives and centred on:

- Rebellion against authority
- Dissatisfaction with and frustration in work, family and relationship
- Aspirations to imagined and unattainable relationships
- Complaints about the daily trivia and boredom of modern life
- Assertions of individual independence and freedom
- Problems (e.g. drinking, drug abuse, self-injury, suicide, etc.)
- Personal narratives and difficulties in dealing with emotions and relationships
- Attitudes toward the bourgeois or decadent lifestyle described in the writers' texts

These two lists show the scope and content of readers' engagement with the glam-writers' blogs in the Comment and Message sections. Readers tend to engage more with the writers' personal lives than their texts, focusing particularly on issues such as relationships and lifestyles as described in the glam-writers' texts.

Now I shall turn to illustrate the readers' reception of the writers' works in the Comment section. Then I shall analyse the readers' responses to the writers' personal lives in both sections of the blogs. Finally I shall evaluate the readers' confessions and constructions of personal narratives on the writers' blogs in the Message section. As enquiries about the technical issues on the writers' blogs are not the primary concern of this thesis, I shall not elaborate on them in this chapter.

Readers' responses to the glam-writers' works in the Comment section

In the Comment section, readers' responses are primarily around topics or issues raised by the authors in the relevant entries, giving expression to personal views and opinions, such as their likes or dislikes of the writers and their works. For instance, in the entry titled 'How many writers don't care for this face?' which was published on November 6, 2007, Hong Ying discussed how important the cover can be for a book

and for a writer. She displayed four different designs for the cover of her book *Shanghai Magician*, which were either abandoned or forbidden. The entry ended with her own feelings about life: 'Life is like that, and we still have to live day after day. I see others' dissatisfaction [with life] and complaints [about life], as well as my own sorrow and stories both within and outside the blogosphere. Life is just this bitter, with less happiness and more failures.'²²³ This kind of generalized assertion is a common way for Chinese to express themselves about their views and experiences.

Following this entry, there were twenty-six comments in total at the time that I drafted this chapter in November 2007. The figure had doubled by June 16, 2009 when I revised this chapter. Among the twenty-six, seven were made in direct response to the book cover. Three out of the seven thought the second cover was better. Miss Hanna for example wrote: 'The second is the best, [according to] my personal view. The colour is eye-catching, and matches the conception of the title... The effect should be good if putting it on the shelf' (November 6, 2007). Four were about the writer's other published books. As Julyi commented: '[I] spent two weeks reading all of your books. Any words are redundant here. [I] only found *Daughter of the River* in the library. I read your blog every day, and I like your sincerity and authentic words' (November 7, 2007). There were also three comments showing emotional support for Hong Ying, one of which was simply 'I love you, Hong Ying' (November 19, 2007). Two were specific to the feeling Hong Ying tried to express on her blog that life is just bitter; one was a compliment about the writer's blog. The other nine comments were casual conversations among readers, concerning anonymous readers who attacked the author by posting impolite comments on this writer's blog.²²⁴

On her blog Hong Ying describes less her fiction than contextual and extra-textual information about the production and reception of her novels. For instance, in a

²²³ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa01000a15.html, accessed on 7/11/2007.

²²⁴ Most of the comments cannot be accessed, possibly because the writer has deliberately deleted them.

series of entries posted on June 27, 28 and 29, 2006,²²⁵ Hong Ying told a long story about her acquaintanceship with the established drama scholar Liu Ji and his wife Danyi in Shanghai, indicating the reason and motivation for her to write the novel *Shanghai Magician*. The entries had little reference to the novel itself, but showed the close relationship between Hong Ying and Liu Ji, and the resemblance between Liu Ji and the protagonist Xiao Yuegui in the novel. There were about thirty to seventy comments on each of the entries. Most comments were not directed at the author's novel, but focused on the extra-textual details, for instance, the impression of women in Shanghai in response to the author's depiction of Liu Ji's wife Danyi, who is an elegant Shanghai woman in the author's eyes. In one of the entries titled 'The Shanghai Women in My Mind' on June 28, 2006, Hong Ying wrote:

She [Danyi] was wearing a new-style qipao and gorgeous make-up, and [her] skin was very good. [Her] nails were polished with multi-colour varnish... She kept telling me in which European cities she buys the clothes, in which seasons she uses Paris perfume, and how she feels about each city she has been to.²²⁶

Through a detailed description of Danyi's appearance and conversation, Hong Ying offered her readers a particular image of a Shanghai woman. This entry attracted many more comments on Shanghai women than on the novel itself. One respondent Aiwa (Chinese for Eva) wrote (June 28, 2006):

I don't like Shanghai women. It is very difficult for us [as] Beijing 'big' women to accept the 'smallness' in their heart. Although I have learnt to be tolerant at my age, I can't completely accept the calculating skills of Shanghai women. We Beijing women are used to *dada lielie* (care little about small things). But I still appreciate the refinement and style of wearing clothes of Shanghai women.²²⁷

A reader called Riguang Xian (Daylight Chord) also commented (July 17, 2006):

I studied and lived in Shanghai for one year. Shanghai women are the most representative among women in all the parts of China. They exhibit the most

²²⁵ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa010003ho.html, accessed on 26/6/2009.

²²⁶ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa010003ia.html, accessed on 26/6/2009.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

beautiful and ugly parts of women...²²⁸

Apart from a few superficial comments on the novel, other responses to this entry addressed the writer as a woman. Reader Phoenix commented: 'both the writer and the writing are beautiful' (September 13, 2006). Xiao Yuegui²²⁹ asked: 'is there such a woman indeed [as the writer], brave, decisive and strong?' (November 19, 2006). Overall speaking, readers do not tend to offer in-depth comments on the novels. Neither does the writer on her blog. Following an interview with *Shanghai Television Weekly* (Shanghai dianshi zhoukan) for her novel *Shanghai Magician*, Hong Ying used 'So Many People Have So Many Biases towards Me' as the title for her blog entry and condemned mainstream critics: 'there are so many literary critics in China, but only a few approve of my works who do not belong to the mainstream'.²³⁰ Rather than discuss her book, Hong Ying diverted the readers' attention to her discontent with existing literary institutions and traditions. Even when referring to a particular book *Daughter of the River* (Ji'e de nü'er, 2000) in the entry on June 20, 2006,²³¹ Hong Ying does not particularly engage with the textual dimension of the novel, but focuses on personal life details such as having various parties with her friends and her excessive consumption of alcohol after she left her hometown at the age of eighteen. By emphasizing the extra-textual information such as the writer's autobiographical details and personal connections with other personalities, Hong Ying seems to move the readers' focus away from her literary work to herself - as a person - and her personal life.

Both a writer and a rock 'n' roll musician, Mian Mian receives fewer and shorter responses than Hong Ying in the Comment section. Apart from entries describing her daily routines, which appear frequently on this author's blog, the content of Mian Mian's blog can be split into two parts. One is the brief introduction to her works,

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ The reader used the name of the protagonist in the novel as the pseudonym on the blog.

²³⁰ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa010006h4.html, accessed on 14/10/2008.

²³¹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa010003cg.html, accessed on 25/6/2009.

including both published and unpublished novels. The other is about her hobbies and activities as a musician and a party planner, such as promoting her career as a 24-hour radio show runner in many entries.²³² Typical responses in Mian Mian's Comment section are supportive voices in terms of readers' compliments about the writer's writing style, talent in music, and reassurance and encouragement in relation to the writer's loss and suffering. They usually compose one or two short sentences, expressing particular views and interests, or make simple requests: 'Pretty texts'; 'I like the melancholy in your style of writing'; 'I want to listen to your music, could you give me some [links to the music]?'; 'Don't close your blog, please', and more personal expressions of consoling and appeasing: 'I'm so sorry to hear about your loss of your dad. Please don't be too upset'; 'Dear Mian Mian, stay well. You are always fine here'. A large proportion of remarks show readers addressing emotional responses to the author.

Responses made specifically to the authors' works on the other three glam-writers' blogs (of which the Comment option was set off by the authors) follow a more or less similar fashion in terms of the content.²³³ I therefore do not elaborate on these here to avoid unnecessary repetitions. The only blog on which readers tend to make more comments on the author's works is Ann Baby's. Ann Baby mainly does three things on her blog: reply to readers' letters concerning her writing and personal life or readers' confusions and anxieties, display photos accompanied by texts taken in places where she has been, and release information about her works and new publications. Among these, the promotion of her books demands least effort from the author in light of the content of the blog entry. In the entry on December 9, 2005 titled 'Goodbye Vivian',²³⁴ which is also the title of Ann Baby's first book (*Gaobie Wei'an*,

²³² Mian Mian provides the link to her radio-show program on the first page: <http://www.udancecn.com/>, accessed on 6/15/2009.

²³³ Among the three glam-writers, Wei Hui's blog was shut in early 2009. All the blog entries and comments are no longer accessible. Ann Baby and Zhao Bo set the Comment option off in 2006 and 2007 respectively. I can only access the comments made on these two writers' blogs before the Comment option was set off. Responses to the writers' works made in the Message section on these blogs are still available.

²³⁴ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f8001000111.html, accessed on 15/6/2009.

2000), the writer only put the image of the book cover, date of publication, name of publishing house, two lines of introduction and the table of contents, without any comments on the book itself. However, this does not affect readers' responses to this entry. Most of the comments are centred on their feelings and experiences of reading Ann Baby's works and the perceived effects and influences of the writer's works on them. For example, reader Zuoshou fuyun (Cloud drift in the left hand) wrote: 'reading this book is like inhaling the smoke of tobacco. [I] know it is a kind of self-destruction but I just can't help myself' (January 31, 2006). Carol also commented: 'this book changed my view of love' (January 31, 2006). Again, all of the comments were very brief.

In a broader sense, most glam-writers do not invite serious literary responses to their works on the blogs. Blogs function more as a declarative tool for these writers than a platform on which literary exchange is invited and celebrated. Ann Baby posted an entry on December 2, 2005, declaring that 'writing only requires honesty and personality. The final judgement of the literary works depends only on the reader. Writing is, and will always be, the loneliest task in the world'.²³⁵ Zhao Bo articulated her disdain and denial of being labelled 'beauty writer' in an entry titled 'As the Scapegoat of Beauty Writers, My Works and I Have Been Raped for Years' on June 11, 2009: 'for so many years, what the hell did I do wrong so that I was attacked and belittled by certain media, cruel critics, journalists, and netizens?'²³⁶ By providing only fragments of their views of their writing and feelings for the public, the glam-writers guide the readers' focus to their personalities and their constructions of self, including occasionally their writerly self. As a result, readers tend to react more to the writers' personal dimensions than the literary works in the Comment section. I shall discuss this further below.

²³⁵ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f80010000vd.html, accessed on 11/6/2009.

²³⁶ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d0100em2p.html, accessed on 12/7/2009.

The changing focus from the works to the personal

Aside from making declarative statements to promote their works, the glam-writers tend to 'employ multiple strategies to construct simultaneous autobiographical narratives' on their blogs (McNeill, 2003: 31), revealing details about themselves and their lives. The topics include the writers' favourite books, movies and music, personal hobbies and interests, leisure activities and social networks, feelings and thoughts about particular subjects, events or moments encountered in the past or present, and personal stories and experiences. The content of their blogs ranges from that of a professional writer to becoming an expert on lifestyles or relationships.

Hong Ying does exemplary work in this respect. On her blog she presents autobiographical narratives of her early years in Chongqing - a city in the midwest of China - and her current life moving between UK and China, focusing in particular on the path and development of her writing career since she first came to the UK as a student in 1991. In her entry of June 6, 2009, Hong Ying describes her hometown Chongqing as one of 'the most beautiful cities in the world' which beats other big cities such as Chengdu, Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou: 'Among the cities I have been to, only Los Angeles has the landscape as such. Whereas it has been considered "the most beautiful city in the U.S." by many Americans, they have not had the chance to compare it with Chongqing.'²³⁷ In an earlier entry dated December 29, 2007, she depicted different experiences of celebrating Christmas in different countries. For example, she was invited for Christmas to a friend's house in Munich and was offered a trout with 'herb, ham and mushroom' which is a traditional Christmas dish, whereas she prepared a turkey for Christmas in London: '[I] bought a seven-kilo turkey produced in the U.S. from an international supermarket. Wrap it with pepper, salt and Vodka, seal it, and leave it on the balcony for three days. Then apply butter over its skin, put chestnut, fennel, refined duck and beef, bread, mushroom, radish and potatoes into its stomach, and add rosemary. Put it into the

²³⁷ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa0100dauk.html, accessed on 15/6/2009.

oven under 220 degree.²³⁸

By detailing her recipes, Hong Ying renders her blog a site for readers with a special interest in cooking and food. Reader Xibu Jiangnan (walking carefully to the south of the river) wrote: 'I also want to cook delicious food of every kind one day' (January 10, 2008), whilst Xiao Yu'er (little fish) commented: 'I'm a chef, and I like [cooking] delicious food, too' (March 12, 2009). In the January 14, 2009 entry Hong Ying shared a recipe for making Italian-style soup with chicken and beans and tips on cooking Italian food.²³⁹ Not only did the writer disclose her 'principles of cooking as a gentle professional chef',²⁴⁰ but she also published texts accompanied by visual images to give readers a clear view of how the food should be cooked and how it looked. For example, the local bean and sausage soup in Italy looks as in Figure 6.3:

Figure 6.3: Image of the Italian-Style Soup Provided by Hong Ying



Source: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa0100bjhd.html, accessed on 16/6/2009.

Along with this photo, there were two other photographs of the mountain Xipanini and the people taken in the local village Kazitemeng posted in the same entry, as shown in Figures 6.4 and 6.5:

²³⁸ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa01007u2g.html, accessed on 15/6/2009.

²³⁹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa0100bj31.html, accessed on 16/9/2009.

²⁴⁰ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa0100b7fh.html, accessed on 16/6/2009.

Figure 6.4: The Mountain Xipanini in Italy.



Source: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa0100bjhd.html, accessed on 16/6/2009.

Figure 6.5: People in Kazitemeng.



Source: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e98efa0100bjhd.html, accessed on 16/6/2009.

Responses to this entry focused equally on the food as well as the village she visited. One reader commented: 'I had the bean and sausage soup before. [It was] too salty and did not taste good. But [I] like Italy very much' (January 12, 2009), whereas one doubted the location which the author described in the entry: 'I am living in Italy at present. I have never heard of this place. I will ask someone here tomorrow' (January 10, 2009). Reader Xiaorou expressed her feeling of seeing the village in the photograph: 'I like this village very much. It seems to me that there might be a party going on at night. If there were a gentleman inviting you to dance, it would be

wonderful' (August 30, 2009). Almost all of the comments point to the food and the place which Hong Ying has been to. The author here features as chef and gastronomist on her blog.

While Hong Ying as a diaspora writer discusses at length her lifestyle and experiences of living abroad, such as learning to make western-style food in Europe, other glam-writers also tend to reveal life events and personal thoughts on their blogs based on their current circumstances. Ann Baby put up details of her trips to Europe, Korea and Japan in her entries on October 30, 2009²⁴¹, May 23, 2009²⁴² and November 13, 2008²⁴³. Each entry was accompanied by photographs taken in those places and texts expressing the author's feelings and emotions at that time. In describing her one-week long vacation in South Korea, for example, Ann Baby wrote:

[I] spent six days in Seoul like this: drunk, laughed about others' jokes, did not sleep at night. [We] four or five people together, sometimes went to drink in more than two places at night. Those were brightly lit bistros, [in which we ate] shellfish grilled on wires, [drank] rack (shaojiu, traditional Korean alcohol), and [smoked] cigarettes. [We] talked until dawn.²⁴⁴

Depictions of the author's personal life of this kind immediately remind me, as a reader of Ann Baby's works, of the way in which the main character's life is constructed and described in her novels. Although the Comment section of this entry was closed by the author, the number of hits was over 150 thousand by December 2009. The blurring of the author's real life on the blog with the character's life in her works seems to fulfill the readers' expectations of, and curiosity about, the writer as a person, and gains this author much popularity among her readers.

Mian Mian embarked on keeping a record of her routine at the beginning of setting up her blog, focusing on her personal life. In an entry titled '17, 2, 06, Why I Must Stop

²⁴¹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f800100fb6p.html, accessed on 12/12/2009.

²⁴² See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f800100d6f5.html, accessed on 15/6/2009.

²⁴³ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f800100b24x.html, and http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f800100b8x9.html, accessed on 15/6/2009.

²⁴⁴ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f800100d6f5.html, accessed on 12/12/2009.

Drinking', Mian Mian reflected on the reasons why she should give up drinking. In earlier entries on February 4²⁴⁵ and January 31, 2006,²⁴⁶ the writer recorded her father's sickness and her sense of intimacy with her daughter and her partner. In an entry on July 16, 2008, Mian Mian wrote: 'I write few blogs and rarely mention the details of my life [in my blog] ... My favourite [hobby] is music. I like music better than writing.'²⁴⁷ In fact, Mian Mian's 'few blogs' amount to around ten entries per month, many more than those of Ann Baby and Hong Ying. Mian Mian also contradicts herself in stating that she 'rarely mentions details of her life' because, in reality, she tells her readers in the same entry things like 'I listened to mother playing the piano', 'I refused to go for a walk with my mother because I wanted to go shopping', and 'I texted my shangshi (her Buddhist teacher)'. The contradiction between asserting privacy and disclosing personal trivia is reflected in most of the entries where the writer focuses on her private life. In fact, all the glam-writers promote themselves on their blogs by presenting personal details.

Among the five, Zhao Bo publishes the most entries and updates her blog most frequently. Zhao Bo invests much in her blog by sharing episodes of her private life with the readers. In one of her entries of August 10, 2006 Zhao Bo told the readers about her special liking for cats and her adoption of a cat named Xiuqiu from her friend,²⁴⁸ whereas on October 30, 2006 Zhao Bo provided the readers with glimpses of three parties she had attended:

One party began yesterday afternoon. In a room named Long March (Changzheng kongjian) at 798 (a famous art gallery in Beijing), the exhibition of Yu Hong's and Jiang Jie's paintings was planned by Zhai Yongming.²⁴⁹ This is an exhibition of the two, both of whom are my favourite women artists. Today's party is a continuation of yesterday's. The third party was spent with old fellows in the

²⁴⁵ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb1010001ww.html, accessed on 16/6/2009.

²⁴⁶ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb1010001vg.html, accessed on 16/6/2009.

²⁴⁷ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb10100aj0h.html, accessed on 15/6/2009.

²⁴⁸ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d010005ub.html, accessed on 23/2/2009.

²⁴⁹ Zhai Yongming (b. 1955), born in Chengdu, influential avant-garde woman poet. The collections of her poems include *Women* (Nüren, 1986), *Above All the Roses* (Zai yiqie meigui zhishang, 1989), and *Collection of Zhai Yongming's Poets* (Zhai Yongming shiji, 1994).

literary circles two days ago.²⁵⁰

Although little is offered about the details of the events, readers can still have an idea about what kind of things the author likes and does in her spare time. In an entry titled 'Searching for a Lost Self' on April 14, 2009, Zhao Bo revealed her relationship with her ex-husband, Shanghai-based critic Wu Liang. The entry was written in a nostalgic tone, explaining the whole story of their marriage:

I married a man who used to be my literary tutor in Shanghai when I was twenty. [He is] an avant-garde literary critic who is sixteen years older than I. [Our marriage was] a teacher-and-student-like marriage. As time went by, the adoration at the very beginning became a sort of rebellion when I grew mature... So a used-to-be-happy family broke... Our marriage lasted for five years. Before the end of our relationship, he asked me to run a bar for him, and he would be in charge of the gallery. Both of us could share things together. It was the first time he ran his own business. The pressure made him nervous, and I was terrified too. I knew I may run the bar for one month, but I could not stay longer. Otherwise I would not be able to focus on my writing. I could not accept that. So I helped to find him another person who could replace me to run the bar. That woman gradually substituted me in every aspect. Finally he did not need me that much. Our relationship ended naturally.²⁵¹

This partly demonstrates that the writer's blog (in fact all the five glam-writers' blogs), which was initiated because of her literary works, was consciously diverted to the writer as a person and her personal life.

By disclosing her past and present experiences as an established yet under-reviewed writer, Zhao Bo is active in promoting herself as a personality and revealing her connections with public figures such as well-known writers, actors, artists and musicians. In a series of entries from July 5 to July 9, 2009,²⁵² just days before her

²⁵⁰ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d01000730.html, accessed on 12/4/2007.

²⁵¹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d01000ds7b.html, accessed on 10/7/2009.

²⁵² See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d0100f1em.html, and http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d0100f1gp.html, accessed on 10/10/2009.

birthday on July 11, Zhao Bo posted photographs of herself and her friends taken at her previous birthday parties, including with famous pop singer Jiang Xin and other musicians. In many entries Zhao Bo showcases to the readers her social network and various social events as an activist rather than as a serious writer. On June 14, 2009, Zhao Bo expressed her admiration for the famous rock 'n' roll singer Cui Jian: '[I] have known my idol Cui Jian for eleven years. [We have had] numerous chats, and numerous arguments. Today I want to send a text message to brother Cui Jian [and tell him]: I found [I] still adore you most in the past ten years.'²⁵³ On May 23, 2009, Zhao Bo wrote: 'I have several male friends who were DJs before. I like them to phone me very much. I just sent a text message to Huang Fan and asked him why his voice in real life is never better than in radio shows.'²⁵⁴ On June 13, 2006, Zhao Bo published eight photographs followed by texts introducing the names and professions of the people in those photos.²⁵⁵ They included the famous talk show host Chen Luyu, models Chun Xiao and Li Ai, singer Luo Dayou, film director Zhang Yang, producer Taozi, scriptwriter Ning Caishen, actors such as Jiang Wen and Li Dongtian, actresses, artists, and celebrities from the real estate industry such as Pan Shiyi. Zhao Bo's deliberate effort in constructing herself as a celebrity and popular among a circle of well-known friends is also evident on her first page where she uploaded a video clip of her appearance on a famous Chinese television talk show, 'Luyu youyue' (Dating with Luyu) with two famous film stars Lin Xinru and Su Youpeng from Taiwan.²⁵⁶

The celebrity effects are immediate and substantial, as shown in the number of hits for the entries which involve popular figures. In an entry on July 3, 2009,²⁵⁷ two days before famous actor Liu Ye's wedding, Zhao Bo published her personal photographs taken with Liu Ye's French fiancée in 2001 in a Beijing pub. This received 241,452 hits by August 15, 2009, a great many more than those of any other entries since

²⁵³ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d0100en98.html, accessed on 2/7/2009.

²⁵⁴ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d0100edkb.html, accessed on 14/6/2009.

²⁵⁵ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d010004ml.html, accessed on 1/3/2008.

²⁵⁶ See <http://blog.sina.com.cn/zhaobo>, accessed on 12/11/2007.

²⁵⁷ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d0100f07d.html, first accessed on 15/7/2009.

Zhao Bo established her blog in 2005. For entries where Zhao Bo mentions details of other celebrities or well-known public figures, the number of hits increases sharply in comparison with those of other entries published in a same period.

According to the statistics of the hits, I observed a clear dynamic between the author's display of her private life and the readers' curiosity about it. The more the writer unpacked the *personal* on the webpage, the more hits she got. The quantity of the hits does not, of course, provide any sense of the content of what the readers comment, which I shall discuss in relation to the readers' self-disclosure in the Message section. Once the writers understand what readers like to read or know, they are more likely to produce the content which caters to the readers' interests and expectations, both textually (composing texts in the entries) and visually (posting photographs or uploading audio-visual clips) on their blogs.

The writers' motivation for blogging points less to serious literary reception than to self-exposure in terms of mundane life trivia. The lack of in-depth engagement with the literary works by the readers in the Comment section relates to the writers' limited concern with discussing their works compared to displaying their personal lives. Thus, the readerly attention to the writers' private life is prompted and influenced by the way in which the writers construct their blogs. The responses readers make to these glam-writers through commenting on particular entries centred on personal life issues, motivate the writers to offer more of this back to the readers, which the writers think readers are interested in. The writers' entries and readers' responses thus reinforce each other, circling in the same plain of the seemingly private sphere.

Wei Hui used to be a regular blog user among these women writers, marketing herself and her works by discussing popular issues and running clinic-like sessions on how to deal with relationships on her blog. However, she deleted all the blog entries in early 2008 for unknown reasons, which made any reference to, or tracing of, her blog entries impossible. She did not re-publish her blog until June 14, 2009,

claiming that she was not a spy as had recently been portrayed on the internet.²⁵⁸ However, this blog entry has been deemed by many readers on certain forums as a means of self-marketing and promoting her new book.²⁵⁹ As the writer closed the Comment option, no comments could be made on this entry.

One of the interesting phenomena indicated on these blogs is a tendency shown by all the glam-writers except Hong Ying who has lived in the UK for a while, to convert to Buddhism or express a willingness to be converted, and articulate their faith in Buddhism. This reminded me, to a certain extent, of the relationship between celebrity and religion (Rojek 2001). In discussing celebrity culture in the west, Rojek asserts that 'celebrity bears no moral connection with moral elevation', as 'notoriety is an equivalent source of public fascination' (ibid: 61). Rojek states that the nature of celebrity culture itself is 'basically a fragmented, unstable culture that is unable to sustain an encompassing, grounded view of social and spiritual order' (ibid: 98). This is true in the Chinese context too. At this stage I cannot ascertain whether or not these writers as public figures and literary celebrities attempted to build a certain connection between the worship of celebrity and that of religion, and the degree to which they were aware of and made use of Buddhism partly as a proof of their spiritual disposition. The glam-writers' articulation of their conversion to the national religion seems more like a testimony to refute mainstream critics' views of them as 'materialistic girls' and 'a generation without social responsibility' (Zong Renfa et al 1998), and of their works as 'an overflow of cultural heterodoxy (yiduan wenhua fanlan) which is not endorsed by the strong social mainstream morality' (Chen Sihe 2000).

²⁵⁸ I know about Wei Hui's story only from her blog, see http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48866b020100e8c6.html, accessed on 15/6/2009. No official information on this is available elsewhere, except several entries in the bbs <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=592124943>, and on <http://www.cc222.com/article/700091.html>, accessed on 25/06/2009. Although one Chinese news reporter Fang Jing was previously suspected as a spy, Wei Hui's claim was said to be a means of promotion for her new book, making herself mysterious. See <http://bbs.cnyantai.com/thread-1426889-1-1.html>, accessed on 25/06/2009.

²⁵⁹ See <http://www.anti-cnn.com/forum/cn/viewthread.php?tid=173233>, accessed on 26/06/2009.

The superficiality and ambiguity of these writers' commitment to Buddhism is reflected in their narratives on the blogs. In an entry on October 31, 2007, Mian Mian for example wrote:

...relationships are full of pain. It is ridiculous. How wonderful it would be to treat love like a meal without after-effects. I'd better go to the place which is nearer to Shangshi (her Buddhist teacher) as soon as possible. I am ningba (Beijing dialect, meaning anxious, easily frustrated), and thus melancholy. But I will be fine very soon, for I am a xiuxing (cultivated and converted) person...²⁶⁰

In an entry dated October 20, 2007, as well as in other entries on her blog, Mian Mian showed her appreciation of, and faith in, Buddhism and her Buddhist teacher Shangshi by saying: 'thank Shangshi, thank all the Buddha. Om Mani Padme Hung (a Buddhist saying).'²⁶¹ In other entries Mian Mian frequently refers to her Shangshi in seeking help and reassurance whenever she needs him as if Buddhism is a practical way of rescuing her from various emotional problems. In order to express her devotion to Shangshi and facilitate her readers who may need to seek help from Shangshi, Mian Mian added a link to Shangshi's blog in the entry dated October 16, 2007.²⁶² Zhao Bo also mentions her Shangshi (her Buddhist teacher Qiaomei renbojie) in several entries with descriptive texts but little substantial content: 'Qiaomei renbojie is waiting for his friends to come to the Qianglin tang plain',²⁶³ and 'for me, I have one more person whom I can trust in this world, who never hurts me and gives all his students a peaceful mind'.²⁶⁴ The writers' relationship with Buddhism is only described in short sentences and functions more like an ask-for-help emergency call, carrying certain pragmatist implications.

Responses to the entries regarding Buddhism were very limited. Most readers did not show an interest in these glam-writers' conversion to Buddhism and their Shangshi. While some showed a disinterested attitude towards the conversion: 'I do not quite

²⁶⁰ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb101000buz.html, accessed on 7/11/2007.

²⁶¹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb101000bq9.html, accessed on 7/11/2007.

²⁶² See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb101000bog.html, accessed on 7/11/2007.

²⁶³ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d0100eool.html, accessed on 28/9/2009.

²⁶⁴ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_470bfb7d0100ajdh.html, accessed on 5/6/2009.

understand Buddhism',²⁶⁵ others made enquiries about the outcome of the conversion: 'does it mean converting to Buddhism can give us a peaceful mind?'²⁶⁶ Most comments were, again, made at a simple and superficial level.

Ironically, Wei Hui used 'Chuan Xiangnai'er de Fo' (The Buddha Wearing Chanel) as the title of her blog entry dated August 1, 2007,²⁶⁷ aiming to refute anyone who regards her as not, or not qualified as, a good student of Buddhism. Besides addressing her decisions in her life plan, such as giving up permanent resident status in the U.S., stopping writing, studying film, and buying a new house, she published part of the transcripts from her interview with the *Changjiang Shangbao* column (Changjiang Business Newspaper) in a question-and-answer style, expressing her particular view of the values and opinions of the relationship between materialism and Buddhism.

Changjiang: It is undoubtedly different to dance with Gucci silky shoes and shoes only worth five *yuan* (RMB 5 in Chinese currency). Do you still love and rely on materiality? What kinds of Buddhist life do you want, having a rich material background while keeping a Buddhist mind, or giving up materiality one day and returning internally to simplicity?

Wei Hui: Yes, I do love materiality, and rely on it. Monks will die without eating. [You] cannot live without dependence on materiality. Regarding the brand, there are some misunderstandings around me. Some think that I am showing off, or I have strong desires for brands. Therefore I am not qualified to speak about Buddha, or learn about Buddha. Even if I learn, it is false.

I feel very sympathetic towards these people. They hold and live with a strong opinion that Buddha has nothing to do with materiality. Actually Buddha has

²⁶⁵ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb10100ee8l.html, accessed on 12/8/2009.

²⁶⁶ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_471cacb101000buz.html, accessed on 7/11/2007.

²⁶⁷ This entry was no longer accessible due to the deletion of Wei Hui's blog. However, I accessed this entry in 2007 before the writer's deletion.

much to do with materiality. 'Xin wu yi yuan' (mind and object are in one singularity) is one, 'Se ji shi kong' (sex is zero) is another.

Does it necessarily prove that I am not loyal to the Buddha simply because I wear branded clothes? Didn't you see monks in various big or small temples staring at pretty girls, or wearing slippers and dressing casually, talking on mobile phones while passing by in front of the Buddha statue? What can appearance and materiality reveal?

Perhaps at the beginning stage of learning about Buddha, avoiding a certain materiality does help you to convert. However, when reaching a certain stage, one still judges a person deviating from the Buddha simply by her Chanel dress.

It is such a pity...²⁶⁸

Apparently, Wei Hui invented her own logic of how to be a material girl and a student of Buddhism simultaneously and harmoniously. Wei Hui suggests that it is possible for a young material woman to live in the metropolis surrounded by wealth while being faithful to Buddhism. This entry used to attract many hits and comments, although the site is no longer available due to the deletion of the writer's blog. Readers were clearly more fascinated by Wei Hui's assertions about her lifestyle than her novels.

Conversion to Buddhism is one among the many options these writers choose to present a digital self, or 'telepresence', to use Schau and Gilly's term, since the act of converting to the national religion is often considered 'socially desirable' (Schau and Gilly, 2003: 388). By taking up different roles in real life as portrayed on their blogs, such as being a lifestyle expert in cooking and travel (in Hong Ying's case), a musician and party host (in Mian Mian's case), and a postgraduate of film studies and U.S. resident (in Wei Hui's case), these writers construct a range of identities for

²⁶⁸ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48866b02010009xv.html, accessed on 7/11/2007. This excerpt was accessed and referenced before Wei Hui shut her blog. The original webpage no longer exists and all the entries are no longer accessible due to the author's shutting down of her blog.

themselves and present 'multiple selves' (Schau and Gilly, 2003: 400) in their narratives.

Compared to Mian Mian and Wei Hui, Ann Baby seems less explicit in her conversion to Buddhism. There is less of direct textual description of why she wanted to convert and what she did in the process of her conversion to Buddhism, but more on the philosophical thinking and self-exploration that accompanied her journey to different places. This is partly reflected in this writer's responses to some of her readers' letters who make enquiries about various aspects of life, with or without referencing the writer's works. In an entry on May 6, 2008, Ann Baby presented the letter from a reader named Luo and replied in a question-and-answer style. Quoting some key words from the reader's letter, Ann Baby expressed her views on the topics and issues raised by this reader. For instance, Luo wrote:

Philosophy, religion, mathematics, and physics, all of which get closest to our soul in nature, but at the same time keep one far away from a simple life. Even if we calm down at this moment, we still cannot deny the scars in our heart. A Buddhist saying goes: anxiety is Puti (a tree, Chinese pronunciation for an ancient Indian word Bodhi). Is this actually a man-made absurdity?²⁶⁹

Ann Baby wrote in her replying letter:

Philosophy, religion, mathematics and physics, and all that, by whatever means ... I do not think they distance people from a simple life, but rather they make our life easier, because the construction of their systems embodies a power to transcend. Rational thinking, analysis and dialectics make our heart and mind simple and purified.²⁷⁰

The entry comprises two parts: the reader's original letter and the author's reply. This is typical on this author's blog and the unique way in which Ann Baby responds to her readers, as she never replies to the readers in the Comment and Message sections. Although the comments on the entries are not accessible, the hits on Ann Baby's

²⁶⁹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f80010095aj.html, accessed on 19/9/2008.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

blog are very high.

Among the five glam-writers discussed here, Ann Baby updates her blog and replies to her readers least frequently, but surprisingly gains most hits for each entry, over 9.6 million at the time I wrote this chapter.²⁷¹ This figure was more than four times Wei Hui's (2.3 million) and Hong Ying's (2 million), nine times Zhao Bo's (1.1 million), and twenty-four times Mian Mian's (0.4 million).²⁷² Such statistics raise interesting questions and inspired me to explore the reasons behind the numbers. It is apparent that the high frequency of updating blogs hardly guarantees more hits, as Ann Baby updates her blog least frequently, while Zhao Bo does it most. The fact that the glam-writers set up their blogs on the Sina site at different dates may partly explain the difference in the number of hits. Ann Baby was the first writer to establish her blog (in May 2005) and has the highest numbers of hits among the five. Nevertheless, Wei Hui has the second highest number but was the last to establish her blog (in February 2006).

One factor which might contribute to the increase in the browsing flow-in rate is that the glam-writers' blogs offer practical advice where readers with various emotional and psychological problems or with a willingness to learn come to seek help and suggestions. Certain writers produce prescription-like entries implying that they may provide certain sorts of consultancy or support to readers seeking advice from them. Two writers out of the five do this. One is Ann Baby, who writes replies to her readers in a philosophical and self-reflecting tone. She tends to offer explanations and her views on a certain topic raised by the reader. For instance, on March 28, 2006, reader Yiping wrote:

Do you think other forms of expression such as image, film, drawing, a simple scene or music is more critical and direct than letters? Writers who use letters as a way of expression sometimes find themselves in pain and incapable of

²⁷¹ These statistics were based on the actual figures shown on the blogs accessed on 12/10/2007.

²⁷² All the statistics were based on the numbers shown on the Hit Counter on the left bottom of the first page of these glam-writers' Sina blogs, accessed on 12/11/2007.

expressing it.²⁷³

Ann Baby replied:

Any forms of art share commonalities. It needs the creator's spiritual intensity as the base [for creation], because this intensity is directly reflected through the works so that different layers and trends can be differentiated. [The creators] may all face pain that cannot be expressed, as well as pain caused by the silence and blankness of expression.²⁷⁴

This abstract way of expression is common on Ann Baby's blog and in her works. The other writer who offers her readers practical advice on lifestyle issues is Wei Hui, who published a series of entries titled 'Aijing' (The Experience of Love), lasting over three months from the first on December 15, 2006 to the last on March 26, 2007. All nine parts of 'Aijing' tell female readers how to deal with dates in an attempt to offer guidance to women who are entrapped, confused, or frustrated in certain relationships. In the fourth part of 'Aijing', Wei Hui wrote: '...start from loving yourself. Only women who are happy when alone can attract more happiness and love. Do not be the slave of your lover.' She extended her blog by proposing four 'do not's' to her women readers:

1. Do not talk too much with female friends about your 'him' over the phone or in the coffee bar at the beginning of your date.
2. Do not think of him too often. If you have to, do not admit you are madly in love.
3. Do not buy expensive things for him too often.
4. Do not call him or text him too often.²⁷⁵

In her earlier series titled 'Chanmeiren Shouce' (The Manual of A Buddhist Beautiful Woman) published between October 10, 2006 and December 8, 2006, Wei Hui also shared with her readers her experience and personal ways of keeping beautiful and elegant. For instance, she taught her readers to 'be mindful', taking one day off every

²⁷³ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f80010003bu.html, accessed on 19/8/2007.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48866b02010007bf.html, accessed on 28/11/2007.

month to work on and acquire the meaning of chan (Buddhism),²⁷⁶ to be alone,²⁷⁷ and to learn to forgive.²⁷⁸ Both 'Aijing' and 'Chanmeiren Shouce' were popular among the readers and attracted a large number of hits within a short period of time. Although these entries and comments are no longer available, readers tended to be intrigued by the writer's views on relationships and advice.

By publishing blogs covering a variety of topics such as courtship, family conflicts, leisure activities (travel and cooking), feelings about particular issues, and personal life trajectories and future plans, the focus of these glam-writers shifts from that of being a professional literary writer to acting as a specialist in psychology and advice such as Ann Baby and Wei Hui, a female lifestyle expert in cooking, fashion and music as represented by Hong Ying and Mian Mian, and an artist and socialite attending various events and exhibitions like Zhao Bo. Their active role in presenting multiple selves and constructing narratives on different aspects of themselves leads the readers to interact with them as people rather than as writers first and foremost.

What the writers' blogs offer are fragments (daily trivialities as shown on Mian Mian's blog), discontinuities (Zhao Bo depicts a great many moments and episodes of her life with little reference to, or coherence with, each other on her blog), and abstractions (Ann Baby tends to lead discussions on topics such as destiny, philosophy and thinking about life and death in an abstract way without materializing them). Their blogs represent an array of traits to which Bauman's term 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000) might be applied in the context of a postmodern culture. According to Bauman, one outcome of textual constructions of the writers' selves and their lives is a sense of immediacy, ephemerality, intimacy and uncertainty.

By now I have established the base on which readers' responses to the glam-writers' works can be explored, by outlining the content of the writers' blogs, part of the

²⁷⁶ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48866b02010005a3.html, accessed on 28/11/2007.

²⁷⁷ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48866b02010005vw.html, accessed on 28/11/2007.

²⁷⁸ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48866b020100062c.html, accessed on 28/11/2007.

writerly intention of establishing blogs, and the readers' immediate reactions to them. The writers tactically showcase their private self and thus encourage the readers to engage with particular aspects of their personal lives. In the next section I shall elaborate the readers' engagement and interactions in the Message section, considering further the way in which the glam-writers' blogs function and operate as a means of self-promotion and become the site where readers reveal themselves by constructing personal narratives and making confession-like texts on the writers' blogs.

Readers' engagement and interactions with the writers in the Message section

There are several types of messages left by the readers on the glam-writers' blogs. First, readers express general views and experiences of reading the writers' works by leaving messages which are sometimes as short and simple as 'I like *Daughter of the River!* [It's] very striking!' (February 27, 2009)²⁷⁹ and 'I like every book of yours very much' (January 15, 2009).²⁸⁰ Responses to the writers' works are often accompanied by readers' personal narratives, describing their feelings and experiences of reading and reasons for their liking for the particular works of the writers. For instance, a reader named Feizi Taoyuan left a message on Hong Ying's blog on February 27, 2009:

Hello, sister Hong Ying. I liked reading your works when I was at university. [I] felt as if [you were] writing about my own life. I came to work in Shanghai recently. This has always been my dream city, but the reality is [making me feel] lost. I went to the Shanghai Bookstore one day and saw your three novels about Shanghai published recently. I like them all, but like *Shanghai wang* [Lord of Shanghai, 2006] most. I finished reading it while sitting on the stairs of the store. I believe that I will get rewarded by working hard and diligently. Finally I wish you, sister Hong Ying, all the best.²⁸¹

Reader Nuannuan de Style wrote to Mian Mian on October 14, 2009:

²⁷⁹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1189711610.html#divMessageList, accessed on 21/9/2009.

²⁸⁰ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1216768770.html#divMessageList, accessed on 1/6/2009.

²⁸¹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1189711610.html#divMessageList, accessed on 21/9/2009.

I am reading your novel *Ni de heiye, wo de baitian* [Your Night, My Day, 2009],²⁸² [and] I feel I am in a state of insanity, being in an uncertainly exciting storm circle. [I am] mentally exposed to a sort of abuse, but I'm happy, because [the novel] expresses something I dare to think about but never say aloud.²⁸³

Reader Youhe posted on Zhao Bo's blog on July 26, 2009:

[I] have carried the book *Dushi nüwu* (City Witch, 2009)²⁸⁴ in my bag recently. I do not think what I get out of the book is decadence, but a different kind of strength. I used to like Ann Baby's *The Plain Year Bright Time* because it gave me a peaceful mind. I think that *Dushi nüwu* makes me feel stronger and joyful on my own.²⁸⁵

The reception of Ann Baby's works by the readers is fairly abstract and vague in content, without even mentioning the title of the writer's work. For example, Heiye (Dark Night) wrote on December 19, 2005:

During my high school years, your texts were an indispensable part [of my life]. In that period of rebellion it is very easy to fall in love with girls like Ann (the name Ann Baby often uses in her novels). But I thought the love for the texts might persist for long. Now [I have] gradually lost the persistence [I used to have]. Now [I am] studying at the university in Shanghai alone. [I] have suddenly understood something deeply you used to express in your books. I found those words have been vague, but something still remains.²⁸⁶

Yaoshahuahj wrote on December 18, 2005:

The first time [I] read your texts, [I] couldn't extricate myself. Those words touched my soul, [creating] a very strong resonance. The corner in my heart which was never exposed to others before was opened. [I] eventually realized [that I] felt really desperate in my soul. Do you know that I dare not read your

²⁸² The novel *Your Night, My Day* was published in January 2009. I do not include this book in my analysis of Mian Mian's texts as the book was published one year later after the interview.

²⁸³ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1193061553.html#divMessageList, accessed on 12/12/2009.

²⁸⁴ The novel *City Witch* was published in June 2009. I do not include this book either in my analysis of Zhao Bo's works as it is too new to be included.

²⁸⁵ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1191967613.html#divMessageList, accessed on 12/10/2009.

²⁸⁶ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1162178432.html#divMessageList, accessed on 4/12/2009.

works for long? Otherwise I would have no courage to live on.²⁸⁷

Ann Baby's readers do not seem to specify any particular books of the writer, but simply convey their complex emotional reactions to the texts. Those reactions often reflect the mood of her novels. They articulate a certain emotional impact, with texts speaking to their experiences, but not necessarily over a long period of time.

Similar to the Comment section, the reception of the glam-writers' works in the Message section has little to do with any textual analysis of the novels, but more with expressive descriptions of readers' immediate feelings and perceptions upon and after reading. It is important here to highlight that there are few in-depth and analytical comments on these writers' works on the blogs. This is partly because most glam-writers do not tend to discuss their works seriously but simply promote their works in declarative terms. For Ann Baby, despite the publicity of her works prompted by third parties such as publishers and magazine columns, the promotion of any of her books seems no longer necessary as she has become an idealized role model for many of her young readers, such as Heiye, after creating a certain set of characters in her novels for the past ten or more years. What Ann Baby does on her blog is, to a certain extent, that she provides her readers with a free platform on which they can engage with the characters and the world constructed by the writer through her writing, as well as a chance to relate these fictional stories to their own experiences and life narratives.

Apart from direct responses to the literary works, readers tend to make various enquiries about the writers themselves and their blogs in the Message section. For example, in response to the closing down of Wei Hui's blog, readers left messages to the author asking questions such as 'where are your articles [on the blog]?' (September 20, 2008) and 'why [did you] cancel all [of your entries]?' (April 17, 2008).²⁸⁸ Most enquiries about the writers tend to be personal greetings or asking for

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1216768770.html#divMessageList, accessed on 1/6/2009.

a favour, such as 'Ann, [I] finally find you here. Are you still coming [logging on to the blog] today? Look forward to your new works.' (December 19, 2005),²⁸⁹ 'Sister Hong Ying, could you send me an invitation on g-mail? Thanks.' (November 2, 2005),²⁹⁰ 'Hello, [I] haven't been here for long, [and] don't know what happened. Have you been alright recently? Are you done with your film? Really miss you very much' (October 5, 2008).²⁹¹ Enquiries about the writers' works are often improvisational, brief in form, usually composed of two or so short sentences, and sometimes abstract in terms of the content. One reader Qili Daoxiang wrote to Wei Hui: 'I don't know why everyone says your texts carry a grey tone, a little wild and a little crazy' (January 13, 2009).²⁹² This reader does not mention the title of any particular book, nor does (s)he give a clue as to what exactly (s)he refers to in terms of style or content of writing. Other messages regarding the writers' works were written in a simple and direct way: 'Hi Mian Mian. [I am] wondering what else you wrote after *Tang* [Candy, 2000]?' (December 18, 2005),²⁹³ and 'Zhao Bo, how can I get the new book with your signature on it? I'd be very happy if you can satisfy me' (July 13, 2009).²⁹⁴ Most of the messages are requests and indicate readers' desire for contact with the writers.

Readers also tend to reveal themselves by telling anecdotes to the writers and constructing confession-like narratives in the Message section, giving expression to their moods, states and personal experiences regarding a particular issue. In a series of messages left by reader Mata dated from January 10 to 12, 2006, Mata wrote to Mian Mian describing her daily routines in twelve consecutive messages. I quote three of them posted on the same day as follows:

Okay, I'm going to stop being insane. I think I have left enough messages. I am still going to do some reading in the library. I am going there with my new

²⁸⁹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1162178432.html#divMessageList, accessed on 12/8/2007.

²⁹⁰ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1189711610.html#divMessageList, accessed on 11/7/2007.

²⁹¹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1216768770.html#divMessageList accessed on 16/7/2009.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1193061553.html#divMessageList, accessed on 19/8/2007.

²⁹⁴ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1191967613.html#divMessageList, accessed on 29/9/2009.

wooden slippers which I just bought. You stay well. Mata - whatever whenever have a nice day! (8:26:48, 2006-01-10)

The library is empty. Now it's about 6pm. The south hemisphere is very hot. I am back leaving you a message. I saw the red rope in your right wrist, I have one too. It was tied by an Indian grandpapa two months ago. I said okay, okay, tie it, tie it. [My] desire is tied so that I can stop loving [someone]. It is too tiring. So [the red rope is on my wrist] till today. I'm going to watch TV at aunt Luo's house. Sex and City is on show tonight. Mata - the pocket monster in the New Year. (12:48:48, 2006-01-10)

I have already shut down my computer, but still thought to leave you a message before going to bed. I think I am a gift appearing in your world, and you are mine too. Although we never drink, smoke, play mahjong (a traditional Chinese game) and go to bed together, I think we have eventually found each other at the beginning of 2006. Then I think this is love, no matter whether [it's] in our souls or arms. Love can't be fake. It is yearning and expression. That's all. [I want] you [to] stay well, be happy, not too courageous. You are always too courageous. (18:08:37, 2006-01-10)²⁹⁵

The content of these narratives remains invested in the moment, showing the reader's desire for connection. There is a certain similarity in style between these narratives and those in Mian Mian's novels such as *Candy* (2000) and *La La La* (1997). One might argue that Mata's identification with Mian Mian through her(is) mimicry of the latter's style of writing is evident in the narratives. The tone of both delivers an impression of associativeness. But one cannot see if there is any relationship between the writer and this reader from these narratives. Neither can one ascertain, according to these narratives, whether or not Mata has read Mian Mian's novels.

²⁹⁵ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1193061553.html#divMessageList, accessed on 1/12/2009.

There is an interesting trend in the readers' self-revealing process, which may diverge from existing studies on the relationship between self-disclosure and intimacy (Archer and Cook 1986; Cozby 1972; Won-Doornink 1985). Scholars tend to relate the amount of self-disclosure to the level of intimacy between the revealer and the recipient. However, neither Cozby's principle of reciprocity, nor Archer and Cook's experiment of self-disclosure and attraction based on attribution and commodity theories applies to my research subjects. Readers tend to disclose more about themselves to the writers than the writers themselves who disclose little on the blogs. This also differs from Jourard's research finding that 'people like most those others who disclose most to them' (in Cozby, 1972: 151). Although the writers do not disclose themselves on the blogs at the same level as the readers, the latter's self-revealing seems a conscious act and demands little from the writers in return. This is evident in the readers' monologue-like narratives in the Message section, as I shall show below.

Although Ann Baby does not reveal much about her private life on her blog, readers tend to disclose themselves more on Ann Baby's blog than on any other glam-writers'. In the Message section readers come to reveal their personal issues and various emotional problems such as anxiety, depression, frustration or desperation, expressing their feelings without offering a full account. For example, a message from a reader named Yike Qizi (One Chess) on December 15, 2005 read like this:

Ann, [when I] read your texts, [I feel] peace in my mind suddenly. There's no one around me, as if I am the only one left in this world. What I have already experienced in my life is analogous to certain scenarios in your stories, but not so 'shenke' (deep or profound) as the I [the heroine] in your story. I think if I were 'shenke' one day too, I would not complain anymore. It is useless to complain too much. [I] finally have to live on. I have always been pursuing happiness, very long, very tiring. Maybe happiness is the most luxurious thing in this world. Do

you think happiness can be pursued? Is happiness to be pursued?²⁹⁶

This is a typical example of a reader's monologue, telling a personal anecdote in an abstract way and attempting to seek advice from the writer. Although the writer's text is mentioned at the beginning of the message, it is apparently not the focus of the reader's narrative. Similar messages also come from readers such as Deskqq who posted on December 8, 2005:

I have constantly looked at the clock minute by minute, or [I will] feel uneasy. Sometimes I think to be human is suffering. Even flowers and trees grow by their nature, the edges or corners (lengjiao) of humans can never grow from the bloody scars after being rubbed down. [I] always console myself, that is a sort of compromise to life. [When] dark clouds accumulate, it may always rain.

Dieshang (Butterfly's Death) wrote on December 21, 2005 in a similar tone to Ann Baby in her novels such as *Gaobie Wei'an* (Goodbye Vivian, 2000):

Life is one hallucination after another. We can only choose to forget. Youth is a tireless yearning. Turn around, and walk toward tomorrow.

Yigeren Xingzou (Walking on One's Own) wrote on January 7, 2006:

[I] came here again because of the haze in my mind (yinmai). For a long period of time, I thought I could get away from the internet, live a peaceful life, and take examinations. However, I found myself too false and flabby in reality.

These kinds of abstract, abbreviated and improvisational messages are very common on Ann Baby's blog. They tend to express a state, any questions they pose are frequently rhetorical, and they do not provide much context in which to understand what is said. The absence of context may be one way in which readers preserve their privacy while expressing something they identify with the writer at different points. But overall, the messages amount to declarations, a speaking into a quasi-therapeutic void.

Differing from Ann Baby who is rarely involved in interacting with the readers in the

²⁹⁶ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1162178432.html#divMessageList, accessed on 29/9/2009. All subsequent references to this writer in this and the next pages are taken from the same webpage.

Message section, Zhao Bo tends to have more active exchanges with her readers by responding to most personal messages. Nonetheless, readers tend to reveal less about themselves on Zhao Bo's blog. The content of the messages on Zhao Bo's blog varies, with little reference to her works but more curiosity about aspects of this writer's personal life such as her hypochondria. Typical interactions between Zhao Bo and her readers are:

Unknow[n]: [I] have not come to see you for long. I guess you must be very busy! Take care. Um, all the best. (20:04:33, 2009-06-04)

Zhao Bo responding to Unknow[n]: Thank you all for coming to visit me. [I am] busy, but often in a mood for daydreaming. So, [I am] a very lazy person inside. (18:08:57, 2009-06-05)²⁹⁷

Shitouji S: Come to see you again. I feel awkward these days. Why are certain people so utilitarian? To be frank, I hate it, but have to make a compromise. Nowadays children are getting more aggressive, and self-centred. [I] don't understand why they think they are so important. I am still the same, go to class early and come back before the [student] residence closes. Eat spicy stuff and have a stomachache. [I] always feel no good. However, I hope everyone has a good time. Zhao Bo, take care. All the best. (23:17:45, 2009-05-11)

Zhao Bo: Learn to make compromises happily. Walk on your own. Listen to music and take it easy. (15:04:30, 2009-05-15)²⁹⁸

Although writers such as Wei Hui never seem to make responses in the Message section, others such as Hong Ying and Mian Mian occasionally write short replies to the readers. Hong Ying wrote, for example, on April 12, 2009: 'We went for dinner. [I] do not think there are many good French films.' This was in response to the message left by reader Lao Tang on April 10, 2009: 'Did you leave earlier yesterday? The film

²⁹⁷ See <http://profile.blog.sina.com.cn/wall.php?uid=1191967613#>, accessed on 17/6/2009.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

was great.²⁹⁹ Through the dialogue I infer that Hong Ying might have been with Lao Tang for some time on April 9 online or offline, although she left earlier for dinner with some of her friends without watching the film. The relationship between the writer and Lao Tang may be one of being friends. On other occasions, Hong Ying replies little. This is also the case with Mian Mian. Overall speaking, the writers' responses to the readers in the Message section remain short and limited. Ann Baby and Zhao Bo are two of the three writers who closed the Comment option (the third is Wei Hui, whose past entries were deleted). The readers can thus only go to the Message section in order to communicate with the writers. Ann Baby receives the most messages from the readers, 4341 pages long, far more than her contemporaries Zhao Bo (293 pages), Hong Ying (279), and Mian Mian (90) at the time I accessed the statistics of their Message sections.³⁰⁰ The substantial number of messages received in the relevant section partly shows the popularity of the writer as a celebrity. The readers are willing to show their trust and respect for the writer by disclosing personal experiences and registering confessional narratives. However, it is a kind of pseudo-intimacy since it relies on an imaginary relation between two people who do not know each other. The readers' self-revealing thus seems to have less to do with the amount and content of the writer's self-disclosure on the blog than their identification with the writer, as shown on Ann Baby's and Mian Mian's blogs above.

On one level, an identification with the writer is achieved through the readers' one-way interaction and their own sense of intimacy with the writer. On another, the writers tend to manipulate the medium of the blog to (re)present and (re)construct their private self by providing glimpses of themselves under different circumstances. This sort of connection created by both writers and readers is like a friend to whom you do not need to say much but simultaneously like a stranger about whom you know little. It represents the paradox of certain kinds of blog interactions. Readers'

²⁹⁹ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1189711610.html#divMessageList, accessed on 12/8/2009.

³⁰⁰ These figures were obtained from the writers' blog pages at 3.38pm, on 17/6/2009 (UK time). Each page of the Message section contains 20 messages. Writer Wei Hui closed her blog including the Message section and Hong Ying deleted some of her messages. The statistics for Wei Hui's Message section were not listed due to the inaccessibility to her blog since early 2008.

revelations of their personal narratives seem to make explicit their trust and liking for, and identification with, particular writers. Whatever the readers aim to do on the writers' blogs, the main motivation for participating appears to be curiosity about the writers as people, their everyday activities and personal musings.

As a researcher working on the glam-writers' blogs, I was initially involved in interactions with certain writers by leaving messages on their blogs. In order to do this effectively as an *insider*, I established my own blog on the Sina hosting site on March 7, 2007.³⁰¹ For the following six months I observed the writers' blogs and became familiar with the basics of updating and maintaining my own blog, as well as participating and interacting on others' blogs.³⁰² I made my first contact with writer Zhao Bo by leaving her a brief message introducing my research project. I did not get any response from the writer until I sent another message asking how to purchase her books. She replied to my message and gave me details about her publications and payment. I asked someone to buy all of her publications for me in China in August 2007. Since then I have kept in touch with Zhao Bo through blogging.

On the basis of my personal experience of interacting on the blogs, one of my key findings is that the glam-writers as celebrities and individual bloggers, pay limited attention to the readers' reception of their works. I have had several interactions with Zhao Bo since 2007, including both online exchange via blog messages and text messages on the mobile. I found that Zhao Bo replied to readers concerning aspects of her life, experiences and emotions more than to those showing an interest in her books. I found a certain tendency in these glam-writers to take the blogs as the site where personal exchange of information was welcomed (although the writers remain disinterested in the readers' self-disclosure by not making many remarks about the readers' messages), and discussion of the literary works is treated lightly. Readers who get replies from the writers tend to feel privileged and continue to focus on the

³⁰¹ See my personal blog site at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/baizhidanggui>.

³⁰² See Chapter 3 on Methodology.

same sort of personal issues, possibly in the hope of sustaining their connections with the writers.

The interactions taking place in the Message sections of these glam-writers' blogs demonstrated that a large proportion of the readers are young, with or expecting to have, an average college or university educational background, aged between their late teens (in high school) and early thirties (graduated from university and in employment for several years). Most readers disclose their educational details when referring to the writers' works and recalling when they read them in the Message sections. For example, Heiye mentions reading Ann Baby's works during her high school years (December 19, 2005).³⁰³ Roaning discloses that Ann Baby's novel *Qiangwei daoyu* [Rosebush Island, 2002] accompanied her/im during the entire senior year of high school till now (December 18, 2005).³⁰⁴ Xinnian Miaosha Xianshi (Belief kills reality quickly) wrote: '[I] have started reading your books since 2000, but never sent you any messages or e-mails. Today is the first time. I began to read your books when I was twelve... now I am nearly eighteen' (December 24, 2005).³⁰⁵ There are many more disclosures of this kind about the readers' age on Ann Baby's blog. Both the age and personal narratives which these readers construct in the Message section seem to play a role in facilitating the process in which they tend to identify or interact with other readers. For example, Enya Yaoyao wrote:

[I] started reading Ann's works when [I was] in high school. For a time, [I] kind of felt that I lived in a way as described in Ann's stories. I also started to write something in a similar style to Ann, and recommended to others certain words and sentences in Ann's texts. Kind of toxic. Now I have graduated from the university, and found a good job in Beijing. I live on my own, busy but delightful, writing very little. Maybe everyone is like this when growing up? (14:26:48, 2005-12-26)³⁰⁶

³⁰³ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1162178432.html#divMessageList, accessed on 1/9/2009.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

One and a half hours later, Han Mingchu posted:

I have become addicted to each of your stories since *Goodbye Vivian*. Underground stations, coffee shops, small restaurants and even dirty toilets in the train stations in your works seem to have their stories. Even death does not scare me, but fascinates and releases me. Maybe our life is too peaceful... We want everything to be more furious, but we are realistic, lazy, scared of death. So we can only enjoy, imagine, and find resonance in others' stories. (15:26:03, 2005-12-26)³⁰⁷

Although the latter did not directly respond to the former's message, the latter seemed to be affected by the former and offered an explanation to the former's question in the last sentence regarding the view of life. These messages tend to have a certain effect on each other, written in a similar way by different readers. Readers see themselves as part of a certain generation, and as going through particular experiences at certain points in their lifecycle.

As a slightly older and more literary glam-writer, Hong Ying's blog has attracted more mature readers of her age than the other four. Some of the readers are acquaintances of the writer, such as Lao Tang, to whom Hong Ying wrote a reply and explained her early leaving on April 12, 2009.³⁰⁸ Another way of telling the age of the readers is through their portrait photos displayed on the left of their names and messages. Whilst on Ann Baby's blog young readers often use cartoons or celebrities' images as their display photos, readers of an older generation usually use photos of themselves.

The online community has been theorized and conceptualized by a vast literature on cyberspace and cybercultures (see Holmes 1997; Rheingold 1993; Willson 1997). Fung's case study of youth in Hong Kong creating their own community via online games suggests a contradictory way of looking at the relationship between the real-

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/profile_1189711610.html#divMessageList, accessed on 11/10/2009.

life world and the cyberworld. According to Fung, 'the communities of online users are not purely virtual, unreal, and imagined but are often actually closely connected to one another through real-life identities' (Fung, in Silver and Massanari 2006 : 130). I found Fung's study particularly useful for my observation of the readers' interaction with each other in the blogosphere, as it provided me with an insight into the 'inseparable' relationship (ibid: 132) between cyberlife and real life, and the significant role of cybercultures both in popular culture and in the everyday life of contemporary China. By having interactions with the glam-writers and communicating with other readers on the writers' blogs, the readers build up their own communities based on similar interests, identities, or personalities. Except Wei Hui, all the glam-writers display a list of the circles (quanzi) which they joined and are a member of.³⁰⁹ Readers can go to visit these circles by clicking the links on the writers' blogs. By virtue of the involvement in other people's blogs and engagement with others' representations, not only do blogs become the site where people make themselves visible to the public, but they also provide a platform for individuals to network and socialize. I shall not elaborate here how readers interact with each other and contribute to those circles, as it is not the focus of this chapter which centres on the reception of the glam-writers' works.

Consequences and Implications of the Glam-Writers' Blogging Phenomenon

Emerging from the end of the twentieth century in the Chinese literary field, the glam-writers have problematized the issue of individuality and individualism by establishing personal blogs in the public domain. The revelation of the personal by the glam-writers signifies a dramatic shift in literary culture from public discourse around literary works to private trivia, and thus from high/elite culture to popular/consumer culture.

³⁰⁹ Wei Hui used to join several circles before shutting her blog. All the circles were no longer on display after closing down the blog.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the writers' blogs tend to integrate book reviews, cover stories, literary gossips, and publishers' advertising as a 'by-product of the commodification of the book business' (Moran, 2000: 49). Wernick's concept of 'a promotional culture' is useful in showing how 'texts produce authors as much as authors produce texts' (in Moran, 2000: 67). The significance of self-promotion is not only that these writers manipulate their blogs as a device for self-publicity, but also that these writers author 'the author'. The writers become the authors of their own (re)presentations, images, narratives, and personae on the blogs quite apart from their works (Chandler 1997; Paasonen 2005). They construct identities for themselves and define themselves in particular ways, for example as a lifestyle expert in Hong Ying's case, a romance consultant in Wei Hui's, and a rock 'n' roll musician and radio show host in Mian Mian's, regardless of their professional role as writer. However, the authorial role of the writers by no means predetermines or guarantees the readers' reception in the context of blogs. As shown in the analysis of the Comment and Message sections of the writers' blogs, readers' responses to the writers are oriented towards the writers as celebrated individuals and their everyday details. And much of how the writers present themselves on their blogs encourages this.

As a new form of self-(re)presentation and online communication which differs from personal home pages and traditional diary writing, not only do these writers' blogs blur the boundaries between the public and the private, but they also contribute to formulating a celebrity culture in contemporary China. The private space of the celebrity writers becomes the spectacle of the public gaze. As Dyer suggests: 'an audience's relation with the star is a compulsive search for the "real" – an attempt to distinguish between the "authentic" and the "superficial" in the star's personality' (in Moran, 2000: 62). Thus 'a fascination with the private self' can be a sale point in the writer's self-promotional efforts, 'a result of the continuing commodification of the self' (Moran, 2000: 63). A person becomes a product. While going to these writers' blogs regularly, some readers dismiss the writers' blogs as 'a fan club to oneself',

'superficial and self-publicizing' (Slevin, 2000: 173; Moran, 2000: 74).

Paasonen claims that 'it seems that when addressing media texts created by "private" people, the meanings of these texts become located in the people's intentions, memories, uses, and experience' (2005: 96). The meaning of the texts on the writers' blogs is constructed by, and negotiated between, both writers and readers. The expectations and fantasies which the readers have of the writers have relevance to the content of the writers' blogs and the way in which the writers blog. Both the glam-writers and readers tactically adopt a form of 'strategic self-disclosure' (Schau and Gilly, 2003: 400) and choose to reveal certain aspects of themselves. Both seem to manipulate their 'personal Web space' to construct a desired self, where 'a physical self' is absent (ibid: 394).

The very recent establishment of literary celebrities' blogs, which has emerged as a new socio-cultural phenomenon not just in China but across many countries, has drawn critical attention from critics, academics, readers in general and writers themselves. The chief editor of the Sina website, Chen Tong, argued:

If celebrities are too busy to manage and maintain their blogs, or appoint other people to do the job for them, or simply record something like news releases, they will definitely lose their readers.³¹⁰

Concerns have also been shown with how professional a writer's blog should look and how professional a writer should be in maintaining her blog. The well-known male writer and critic Chen Cun has a tolerant attitude towards the quality of the writers' blogs, believing that celebrities who write blogs are ordinary bloggers, and that readers should not have high expectations of these writers' blogs:

Setting up a blog requires a huge amount of effort. (It) needs constant update and maintenance. A so-called celebrity, especially a writer, does not have that much time to maintain a blog. Celebrities' blogs as such will surely not exist

³¹⁰ See <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/3956978.html>, accessed on 11/10/2007.

long. I find that Ann Baby has not turned up in her blog for a long time.³¹¹ However, Professor Huang Fayou (b. 1969) from the Department of Literature and Journalism, Shangdong University, takes a negative and polemic stance and argues that the prevalence of celebrities' blogs is no more than a means of self-hype by the websites and celebrities, or to put it another way, pure advertisement:

Many celebrities who write blogs have little or no knowledge about the blog, even do not know the basic operations... Websites where celebrity blogs are established do not really require anything from celebrities. Neither do celebrities have time for it... when you read those celebrities' blogs, you may find you are completely wasting your time.³¹²

While critics hold diverse views of the celebrities' blogs, I have gathered opinions from representative writers who are as famous for being a writer as for their blogs. The well-known post-80s writer Guo Jingming (b. 1983) said that the blog is a platform for communication with the readers:

I like to record my life on the web. When I first heard of this system (Sina blog), I came to write. Actually it does not matter where one writes... I have no idea what others think about or what they do. Personally I take it as a platform where I can communicate with readers. It is a good thing to have one more communication platform.³¹³

Ann Baby also writes in one of her blog entries:

My personal diaries won't appear here (Sina blog). It is just a communication platform, and only open to the readers.³¹⁴

On the one hand, writers such as Ann Baby and Mian Mian show a certain degree of tolerance of or disinterest in the readers' conjectures about the writers' purposes and intentions of setting up the blogs. On the other hand, Hong Ying's and Zhao Bo's deletions of certain comments and messages reveal the opposite and contradictory

³¹¹ See <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/3956978.html>, accessed on 11/10/2007.

³¹² See <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/3956978.html>, accessed on 11/10/2007.

³¹³ See <http://gb.cri.cn/3601/2005/11/04/882@766157.htm>, accessed on 02/10/2007.

³¹⁴ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45456f80010004ax.html, accessed on 01/10/2007.

stance in the sense that both of them care about the ways in which readers view them.

There are also examples of how celebrities could not cope with the problems of being famous. Women writers such as Chi Li (b. 1957)³¹⁵ and Xu Kun (b.1965)³¹⁶ closed their Sina blogs, announcing their reasons for making this decision. In a letter to her readers before closing her blog in July 2006, Chi Li wrote:

I made a naïve mistake to see the blog as a personal platform. The blog is like an open garden without the fence. People jump in and out with high freedom, which makes a writer who writes lose the freedom... if you do not reply in your blog, some people are unhappy, some cry, some condemn, like a madhouse. I take pains to be the dean of the madhouse, taking care of all the emotions.

Actually, however, I do not have time for this.³¹⁷

Chi Li stated that: 'I do not feel any loss after closing my blog. A blog is not necessarily an indispensable channel... everything on the internet is just coming up too directly. I cannot afford it.'³¹⁸ Xu Kun also shut her blog three months after she set it up, admitting that she did not have the time to write blogs and reply to her readers.³¹⁹ All these examples reflect a backlash against the demands of virtual interaction. Giles points out that the problems celebrities have to face are first, to deal with the sheer number of relationships with many people in which 'rudeness and arrogance is often attributed to celebrities' (2000: 92), and second the loss of privacy (ibid: 96). By means of online exchanges of information, ideas, interests, values, and beliefs, the blogs have caused certain 'unintended consequences' (Slevin, 2000: 172), independently of the writers' 'initial impetus' (Schau and Gilly, 2003: 392). The 'online homes' (Paasonen, 2005: 65) have become sites where certain dimensions of the writers' private lives are revealed, discussed and consumed among the readers.

³¹⁵ See <http://blog.sina.com.cn/chili>, accessed on 26/11/2007. All the posts in this blog were deleted, but the blog site is still preserved under this writer's name.

³¹⁶ See <http://blog.sina.com.cn/xukun>, accessed on 26/11/2007. All the blog entries on this site have been deleted, but the first page of her blog has been reserved under this writer's name.

³¹⁷ See http://qqww.blog.hexun.com/4686042_d.html, accessed on 3/12/2007.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ See <http://www.ewen.cc/qikan/bkview.asp?bkid=113575&cid=336742>, accessed on 3/12/2007.

It is in this sense that the personal becomes a commodity for these glam-writers, marketing themselves as celebrities and their works.

A sense of intimacy between the writers and readers is created through the writers' disclosure of everyday details and the interactive responses made by the readers centred on their curiosity about the writers' private lives 'on a more regular and everyday fashion' (Marshall, 2006: 640), as well as the readers' self-revelations, at the cost of leaving the literary works least discussed on the blogs. Through the self-disclosure on the writers' blogs, the readers build an imaginary relationship with the writers, which is in fact a one-way communication in which the readers construct their own personal narratives. The writers' actual engagement with the readers on the blogs remains very limited. It is interesting to note that on Ann Baby's blog the less the writer discloses her personal life, the more readers engage in the self-revealing process. The assumed intimacy between the readers and writers relies heavily on the former's identification with the latter, and is partly reflected in the amount of the readers' self-revelation.

The revival of the author through her active disclosure of *the personal* in the blogosphere plays a central role in the public reception of the writer as a public personality, and that of the literary works as by-products in this context. The glam-writers as celebrities and their private lifestyles have been subject to consumption by the readers which 'has become a part of everyday life in the twenty-first century' (Turner, 2004: 84). It is ironic that as celebrities, these writers strive for individuality and personality in the operation of gaining fame in a platform where individuality is seen as diminished, if not abolished, by a commercialized way of selling the self and the literary works.

Whilst most of the women readers I interviewed in my fieldwork did not identify with these glam-writers' lifestyles and views, as discussed in Chapter 5, a greater level of identification with the writers, Ann Baby in particular, in terms of lifestyles, personal

experiences and views of life, was evident amongst the readers on the blogs. Most of them constitute a younger generation who show greater curiosity about these writers and make an emotional or 'affective investment' (Marshall, 1997: 73-5) on these writers' blogs. Turner argues that 'celebrity now occupies an increasingly significant role in the process through which we construct our cultural identities' (2004: 85). This was also evident in the ways in which the readers responded to the glam-writers on the blogs I researched.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the rise of a group of young women writers, collectively known as 'beauty writers' (meinü zuojia) or glam-lit writers,³²⁰ most of whom were born in the 1970s (regarded as the post-70s generation), was both a literary and a socio-cultural phenomenon in mainland China. Their representation of the personal, 'an alternative lifestyle' in particular (Zhang 2003), in their texts attracted critical attention from the academy (academics and literary scholars), literary circles, the public (lay readers), and the online population (readers participating in online discussion and commentary on the works by these glam-writers). In this thesis, I examined three different types of reception of works by five Chinese glam-writers: Ann Baby, Mian Mian, Hong Ying, Wei Hui and Zhao Bo. They are representative of the so-called 'beauty writers' and subject to literary critiques and public inspection. The three different reading constituencies in China I focused on, were literary critics, women readers, and participants on the glam-writers' blogs. This kind of research on the reception of the writers' works is completely new in China, and therefore constitutes my original contribution to the indigenous research on reception studies and empirical approaches to literature in mainland China.

The diversity in the reception of these writers' works by the three different reading constituencies, as mentioned above, carried several implications. First, literary critics' evaluations of these writers' works diverged from the way in which women readers actually read these novels. My research findings demonstrated that this gap between professional reading and lay reading resulted from different modes of interpretations based on historical and social understandings of literature and personal experiences in real life respectively. Second, the readers' focus, especially in the online context (also evident in the critics' and women readers' narratives), shifted from the works to

³²⁰ See http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=336&dat=20000709&id=DNIRAAAIBAJ&sjid=_O0DAAAIBA J&pg=6784.3625335, accessed on 12/08/2009.

the glam-writers themselves as private individuals and their ways of living as celebrities. Although I illustrated that Chinese women readers were not 'cultural dupes' (Hall 1981; Radway 1987), upon whom the impact of the literary works was predicted by the mainstream critics, women did perceive, to different extents, influences of these works on a variety of aspects of their lives, such as their views, behaviour, and value systems for a certain period of time. Third, the glam-writers took on a position in which they offered to their readers glimpses of their private lives and advice on how to live a bourgeois way of life, for example on their blogs. Their celebrity status was reinforced by these writers' 'secondary performances' (English and Frow, 2006: 52) not only in the traditional media (journals, magazine columns, television, and book-signing events), but also through their own channels of publicity and promotions, i.e. their personal blogs.

One of the possible ways to examine the reception of these writers' works is to take a top-down approach by looking at state intervention from a macro-level perspective. Berezin's (1991) classification of the relationships between state and cultural production sheds light on the patterns of Chinese cultural production before and after Mao's era. Similar to Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR, Mao's regime controlled the content of cultural products, and their production and distribution in domestic contexts. In the early post-Mao era, the Communist party loosened the previous state control over 'public discourse, class, gender and moral codes', including cultural and literary production, although it still held 'politicized standards for defining literature and morality' and 'the fundamental [notion] that literature should serve society' (Wang: 2004: 141). That the Chinese state loosened its control over the content of literary production in the post-Mao era to some extent left space and possibilities for the flourishing of women's writing especially from the 1980s. As I already mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, the rise of so-called individualized writing advocated by women writers such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai is exemplary of the breakthrough of Chinese women's literature and the changing landscape of the Chinese literary scene in the 1990s. Despite the state ban of two post-70s glam-writers' novels,

Shanghai Baby by Wei Hui and *Candy* by Mian Mian in 2000, the level of state control over cultural artefacts has gradually reduced. This allows for a greater level of freedom in literary production and personal expression. Especially at the time of the ban, it also boosted the domestic underground sales of pirate copies and the overseas popularity of these glam-writers and their works.

Another approach to understanding the reflexive relationship between social structure and literary production is an analysis which 'directly links these works to the social characteristics of their authors or of the groups for whom [the literary works] were really or potentially destined and whose expectations they are intended to meet' (Bourdieu, 1993: 180). However, this process cannot explore the complex relations between 'agents and institutions engaged in literary struggles' (ibid: 183), and the operations of the Chinese literary system. Therefore Bourdieu's insistence on carrying out a 'critical genealogy' by studying both 'the history of the process of canonization and hierarchization' and 'the genesis of the systems of classification' (ibid: 180) within the 'literary microcosm' is of great importance to investigate the dynamics between 'agents and institutions', between Chinese women's writing and 'the real divisions and position-takings', here of the Chinese literary field (ibid: 182).

My primary concern with the glam-writers and their works was their indigenous reception by the different reading constituencies. In Chapter 2, I discussed the ways in which principal theories and ideas such as reader-response criticism articulated by theorists Jauss and Iser informed my thinking about my research. In Chapter 3, I described my research methods and discussed some of the issues that arose in my fieldwork. I adopted textual analysis as my primary means to analyse the writings by literary critics and scholars on the glam-writers' novels. I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with women readers, transcribed and translated the interviewing data, and examined the actual women's responses to these works through their narratives. Finally, I investigated the online reception by participants on the writers' blogs and interactions between the writers and readers through participant

observation.

In the first half of my Introduction, I briefly outlined the development of Chinese women's writing from pre-modern China to the beginning of the twenty-first century, focusing in particular on the historical, political and socio-cultural context in which the glam-writers' works were produced, disseminated, and interpreted. In a historically and ideologically gendered patriarchal society such as pre-modern China, women and their cultural activities tended to be marginalized by the dominant class. In the early twentieth century when the first feminist movement took place in the west, women's development in the Chinese Republic initially coincided with Chinese nationalism and conformed to a socialist and masculine ideology. After the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, although the Communist party advocated women's liberation and launched gender-equality policies to encourage women to take part in public life on the same terms as men, women were still restricted in their literary activities. Only in the 1990s when the market economy took over and China opened its doors to the outside, did a new form of writing, known as individualized writing, emerge to replace the conventional function of literature as a political instrument manipulated by the ruling class and break with the literary tradition that embraced certain kinds of grand narratives and masculinist constructions of femininity. Women writers such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai gave expression to female experiences and female desires, setting the exemplar for the latter younger generation of so-called beauty writers.

In the second half of the Introduction, I reviewed the major works by the five glam-writers whose reception I deal with in this thesis, namely Ann Baby, Hong Ying, Mian Mian, Wei Hui and Zhao Bo. I considered several factors for the selection of these writers. First of all, these writers represent a young generation of female intellectuals who were born at a particular period of Chinese modernization and political and economic reform. They witnessed the influx of western capital and culture into Chinese society, and the intertwining nature of Chinese social transformation and

transition in which conventional ideologies and institutions were questioned and challenged, and conflicts and ambivalences emerged in every aspect of social life. Second, the emergence of this group calls for attention not only to women writers' status in the contemporary literary field, but also to urban women's development and living circumstances at large in late 1990s China. Third, examining this particular group of writers' works' reception provides a way of analysing how young Chinese women envisage gender and subjectivity at the turn of the twenty-first century. It also highlights women's role in China's search for modernity and contemporary expressions of women's views and ways of living.

Relying on reception theory and reader-response criticism (Freund 1987; Holub 1984; Iser 1974, 1978, 1989; Jauss 1982), I oriented my analysis towards reader responses in the meaning production and negotiation within the literary system. For example, Jauss's reception aesthetics emphasizes the role of one's historical experience in one's aesthetic reception of literature. The historicity of an individual's professional praxis is relevant to the criteria on which Chinese mainstream literary critics rely to evaluate the women writers' works. The glam-writers' taking up of an overt feminine position in their writing not only subverted literary traditions and male-dominated discourse, but also went beyond Chinese literary critics' 'horizons of expectations' which are rooted in their gender-based stereotyping consciousness and ideologies. Whilst most male critics tend to feel uneasy about these works, reacting either silently or furiously to these glam-writers, certain younger editors such as Li Jingze and Zong Renfa and feminist critics such as Dai Jinhua tend to offer a different reading and understanding of these writers' works. As I demonstrated in this thesis, the reception of the glam-writers' works varied according to the different historical, cultural and social factors which influence the ways Chinese critics interpreted and experienced these texts.

Thus in Chapter 4, I analyzed three major different types of criticisms by the literary critics whose interpretations of the glam-writers' works are diverse and contradictory

in nature. While these criticisms can be categorized according to the different positions literary critics take, I identified the critics in terms of the thematic specificities of their critiques: i.e. the criticism of the glam-writers as *people*, of the glam-writers' works as literary *texts*, and of the emergence of the glam-writers as a socio-cultural and literary *phenomenon*. I structured my discussion of the literary reception to show the contradictions and tensions in the critical responses to a new type of women's writing by literary critics in different positions and ranks within the literary hierarchy (e.g. mainstream and marginalized), and to partly reflect the way in which critical reception operates within the power relations in the contemporary Chinese literary field.

Through my analysis of the literary critics' writings, I illustrated the ways in which literary critics interpreted and responded to the glam-writers' works. In these critiques one could already observe a tendency of the changing focus of literary criticism from the literary work to the writers as people, and the emergence of glam-writers as a gendered social phenomenon. As part of contemporary popular culture, the rise of the glam-writers' works acts as testimony to the fact that consumer culture accompanied by the market economy has arrived during the course of China's modernization. The contradictions and ambivalences in literary criticisms result from China's socio-political and ideological changes and their impact on individuals' perceptions and value judgements. For example, while collectivism had long been advocated and celebrated under Mao's regime, individualism and so-called individualized writing, which were mostly reflected in the works by avant-garde writers such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai in the first half of 1990s and then over-used by the post-70s glam-writers as a group characteristic in the second half, were only appreciated by, and restricted to, a small group of intellectuals when used 'in its safely historical instances' (Hightower, 1961: 168). Although feminist critics and some younger male commentators tended to show their sympathy for these works, mainstream literary critics, based on the Confucian misogynist tradition, belittled and condemned these texts as trash and evil, 'seeing the objects of admiration now

speaking up and standing up to undress herself in frank admiration of her own body' (Wong, 2006: 404). As Lisa Wong puts it: 'in the voices of the critics, we hear a glaring double standard that reveals the persistence of patriarchal inhibition of women's freedom of expression' (ibid: 405).

The range of responses to these works depends on the extent to which literary critics remain loyal to, and/or critical of, the history of literature and its traditions embedded in Chinese patriarchal culture. The pre-1980s canonization of literary works predetermined the framework and criteria upon which critics relied in their evaluations. While elite/high literature refers to narratives closely related to or reflecting Chinese history and social 'reality' serving the dominant under Mao's regime, the glam-writers' works, focusing exclusively on expressing female desires, personal experiences and resisting existing systems, are subject to disapproval and dismissal (Lu 2008; Zhong 2007). Exhibitionism, vulgarity, degeneration, and corruption have become the mainstays of mainstream critics' attack on the glam-writers' works and their morality as a whole. I argued, however, that the mainstream literary critics' prejudice against this particular group of women writers and their writings based on a certain literary tradition, leads to pigeonholing these writers and a lack of engagement with new cultural phenomena.

I also showed how mainstream critics saw the glam-writers' works as a plot initially set up by male editors (Zong Renfa et al 1998) and later manipulated by the media. I argued that this view focused on the writers as private individuals as much as on their works. A radical example of attacking these writers personally was the work by Ta'ai, *A Book of Criticism of Ten Beauty Writers* (2005), in which the author made personal assaults on the ten women writers. Although the book was not considered serious literary criticism, it received significant attention from mainstream critics and scholars within the literary field such as the established critic Zhang Yiwu and the well-known writer Bai Ye.

I demonstrated that mainstream critics based their judgement of the works on whether they followed or broke with literary traditions served. When referring to novels written by glam-writers such as Mian Mian and Wei Hui, critiques such as 'distasteful, immoral, and harmful' (Lu, 2008: 168) and slogans such as 'hedonism, dandyism, subjectivism, and materialism' (ibid: 175) were used to describe them. It was evident that the glam-writers' works broke with literary tradition not only in their style of writing which diverged significantly from that of the previous generation, but also in the topics raised which centred on women's desires and personal experiences, women's rebellion against authority, and women's aspiration for a different lifestyle and materiality. To a certain extent, the post-70s' writing acted as a barometer of the 'master-pieces' in the Chinese literary history. However, these critiques failed to mobilize different sets of criteria to engage with this particular type of literary production as a new form of literary expression.

Although the mainstream critics reacted negatively to so-called 'beauty writers' and 'body writing', they did not construct a uniform and consistent discourse to give expression to their resistance and opposition to these writers and their works (Zhong 2007). The pressure from the overseas popularity of women writers such as Wei Hui, Mian Mian and Hong Ying, and massive debates around their works on the internet refuted and silenced both the state and literary authority. Many critics found themselves 'in [an] awkward position' and reluctant to voice their contempt, for the sake of worrying about 'appearing to be taking the side of the government' (ibid: 230). The ambivalence in mainstream critics' attitudes towards the glam-phenomenon manifests the tensions between different fields of power relations (i.e. social, political and cultural fields) and from within the literary microcosm of contemporary China.

Whereas mainstream critiques tended to ascribe the non-literariness and degeneration of the glam-writers' works to the particular socio-historical background against which these writers were brought up and the writers' intentions and desires of subversion, critics such as Xie Youshun and Zhang Ning were more concerned with

the texts and pointed to the similarity of the post-70s writing. Apart from the common topics and themes raised in these novels, there is a tendency to blur the boundary between the character's life in the novel and the author's life in reality. As they did on their blogs, this mode of writing was seen as a conscious act on the part of the glam-writers. The conflation of author and narrator was both a writing technique for the glam-writers producing quasi-autobiographical narratives and a marketing strategy for self-promotion. Both literary critics and the women readers I interviewed acknowledged this.

I also delineated the reception by critics from a marginalized rank in the literary field, who offered different perspectives to understand these works. For example, feminist critic Dai Jinhua set off from a different standpoint, evaluating the glam-writers' works in relation to current women's living circumstances and experiences in urban China. Dai (1999) analysed Chinese women's writing as a socio-cultural phenomenon of the 1990s and classified the glam-writers' works as an expression of urban culture, popular culture, and youth/sub culture (Lu 2008). This different view of a less influential/mainstream critic articulated different perspectives of interpreting the glam-writers' works among Chinese literary authority.

Generally speaking, whereas the younger generation of literary critics tended to react more positively than the older ones, women scholars had a more tolerant attitude toward these works than their male counterparts, at the cost of recognizing the limits of these works but arguing against a gender-based conventional mode of criticism. As to whether the most debated novel, *Shanghai Baby*, is a mere mimicry of western literature and a manifesto of an aspiration to a certain western lifestyle by a modern Chinese woman living in the metropolis, or a political protest by a spokeswoman of Chinese women's emancipation in the twenty-first century, literary critics were not able to reconcile these arguments. I shall return to discuss this later in the closing paragraphs.

While men are perceived as reading differently from women, women readers themselves, as I found in my research, had discernable reading patterns, perspectives, levels of identification with the authors/characters, and different moments of engagement with these writers' works. Chapter 5 provided an analysis of the actual Chinese women readers' reception of the glam-writers' works based on the transcripts of fifteen interviews I conducted between January and March 2008 in five cities in the south and southeast part of China. My research findings indicated that my women readers in their late twenties did not appear to be avid readers of literature as such. Compared to their school years, the time spent, the quantity and frequency of reading had decreased sharply since they took up employment after graduation. Despite declaring novels their favourite genre of literature, my interviewees' reading was mainly reduced to women's magazines and short-length and light articles on the internet. Generally speaking, women's interest in reading was determined by their changing life circumstances and by the nature and requirements of their jobs. Women who worked in fields such as journalism, law, and education tended to read more than those who worked in the financial and commercial sectors.

Most women read the works by Ann Baby, Mian Mian, and Wei Hui when they were in high school and/or at university, either recommended by their friends and peers, or persuaded by the book reviews or introductory information published on websites. Almost all of them could at least in theory afford to buy paperbacks at the time when they read these novels. Although Radway's assertion of women's act of reading romances as a 'declaration of independence' (1987: 7) may well explain American middle-class women's needs and desires, my sample did not show this kind of demand strongly through their choice of reading the glam-writers' works. The fact that they stopped reading these novels at the time they took up employment indicates that the consumption of these novels was a lifecycle issue for these Chinese women, and that these novels could no longer speak to young Chinese working women's needs in real life, including pressures from both work and marriage. In fact, they had

less time and interest in reading lengthy novels in paperback than surfing on the net. This fact makes the following chapter on the reception of the glam-writers' works on the blogs necessary and partly explains some of the particularities of the readers' online engagement.

Although the women readers I researched shared certain similarities, e.g. they were of the same generation, known as the post-80s, and from economically advanced cities in southeast China, they had or were undertaking university-level education, and most of them had experiences of working for foreign-owned or joint venture enterprises and dealing with romantic relationships, they did not read the glam literature in the way in which social and cultural conventions and ideologies suggested as articulated by the literary critics. Most of my interviewees had a critical view of the labelling of the glam-writers and as beauty writers or fashionable women writers. They did not see them as a unified writing group. Women readers such as F7 saw the label 'beauty writer' itself as 'a lampoon and mockery' which belittled these writers and their works, and others such as F11 ascribed the eclipse of the writers' individuality and the resulting criticism of their works to such labelling and classification. On the one hand, women readers tended to recognize that the sensation caused by the beauty writers was 'a market-driven demand' and 'a planned process' manipulated by a number of agencies such as book publishers, magazine editors, and the media. F3 pointed to the way in which the public's attention was diverted from the literary works to the glam-writers as private individuals, not least through the writers' own efforts in packaging and marketing themselves. On the other hand, they questioned the veracity of these glam-writers as both *beauties* and *writers*, and did not rate these writers highly in literary terms. In the latter sense they exercised a judgement not dissimilar to that of the literary critics. But unlike the literary critics, the women readers I interviewed were more tolerant of the lifestyles portrayed in these writers' works, even if they did not emulate them. Readers such as F11 reported that in contrast to the women writers of the older generations, the glam-writers were *famous for being themselves* but not for their works. Among the five

glam-writers I researched, only Hong Ying was considered a relatively more literary and serious writer.

In my analysis of the actual women readers' responses to the novels, I demonstrated that Pearce's notion of 'the reader as a lover, whose object is not to understand the text but to engage it' (1997: 6) has its validity in Chinese women's reading and experiencing of these novels. Most women readers perceived themselves as partly fascinated by these texts' way of depicting Chinese youth's experiences of dealing with romantic relationships and expressing feelings among young isolated female intellectuals drifting in metropolitan cities as 'fringed individuals' and living in a different way from ordinary women of the same or older generations who took up a traditional role in the family. Almost all the women readers were preoccupied with the lifestyles and personal experiences described by the glam-writers rather than with the literary attributes of the works.

What my women readers also attempted to do in the reading process, consciously or unconsciously, in addition to their emotional engagement with the novels, was to build possible connections between the texts and their own social reality based on their personal experiences. Whereas most women readers did not deem the glam-writers' lives in real life to be the same as those of the characters described in their novels, many thought the characters portrayed were either some form of reflection of the authors, or constructions of their ideals whose lives and personalities were not possessed and thus aspired to by the authors in real life. Women readers' discontent with the norms of modern life and dominant patriarchal ideologies was to a certain extent reinforced by the depictions of the protagonists' life experiences in these novels. This used to be disallowed and condemned by mainstream literary circles in China's socialist patriarchy. Topics such as mistrust, betrayal, seduction, indulgence, conflict, and desperation in the novels spoke to the experiences of modern Chinese youth's relationships and life situations, and were perceived by the women readers as articulated by 'real, courageous, and honest' personalities.

However, mature readers did not tend to endorse the way the glam-writers described sexual promiscuity and female sexuality, although they expressed their interest in the heterosexual relationships depicted in their works. Neither did they identify with the characters' decadent and self-indulgent lifestyles, although some showed their admiration of, and aspiration for, such a way of life. Two university students in their late teens, for example, told me that they were eager for the lifestyle depicted by these writers. Almost all the women readers showed their understanding and tolerance of the characters' way of living, but few thought that they would live in the same way in real life. The disjunction in some interviewees' attitudes between the rejection of aspects of the characters' degraded lifestyles and the former's professed desire for such a way of life indicates a dilemma which Chinese young women have in coping with a rapidly changing social reality and the notion of the 'modern bourgeois life' in mainland China. The demands of their 'real' lives did not match the possibilities of the divergent lives portrayed in the novels.

My research findings indicated that the way in which my women readers responded to the glam-writers' works was conditioned by certain factors. Age, location, education, occupation, reading history/habits, environmental changes such as moving between different cities, and personal circumstances such as marital status, all to different extents exerted their influences on these women's perceptions of literary works. For instance, women readers who were employed at the time of the interview found themselves unable to read much literature due to their busy schedules in the workplace in comparison with their university/college time. College students tended to be more influenced by the characters' lifestyles and emotions than women who had stable jobs and incomes. Women in their late twenties showed a slightly changed focus on stable relationships whereas women in their late teens and early twenties were more intrigued by the divergent lifestyles and unfulfilled relationships depicted by the glam-writers. Women who were in transition in their lifecycles such as taking up employment and moving between different geographical locations, tended to be more likely to change their reception of the glam-writers'

works than those who remained relatively stable in their personal circumstances.

It is interesting to note that the way in which the women readers perceived the glam-writers' works seemed not to be influenced by the literary critics' attitudes towards these works, which in other contexts 'help set the conventions through which other readers will approach the text and develop their own meanings' (Griswold, 1993: 465). What mainstream critics worried about in claiming that these novels exerted a bad influence on Chinese young generations was not reflected in the women readers' narratives of their perceptions. On the contrary, most of these women made a clear distinction between their own value systems and lifestyles and those of the glam-writers or those depicted in their novels. The influence of these works was usually short-lived and insignificant, and contradicted the anxiety of influence implied by the temporary banning of the novels by the Chinese government and the mainstream critics' angst.

The contrast between mainstream critics' professional reading and ordinary women's reading of these works demonstrates the gap between Chinese literary institutions and individual readers in decoding the literary works produced by the same women writers. This shows that they were not *purely passive recipients* of media messages, and reinforces the assertion articulated by cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall (1981), John Fiske (1987; 1990), and feminist critic Janice Radway (1987) that audiences are not 'cultural dupes' but *savant* readers of popular culture. The novels thus had what one might describe as a 'short-lived therapeutic value' (Radway, 1987: 85) for the women readers I researched, associated with the point in their lifecycle they were in.

I have demonstrated that the readers shifted their focus from the glam-writers' works to the glam-writers themselves as private individuals and their ways of thinking and living. Such a shift is predicated upon their novels, as well as the way in which these glam-writers represented themselves on their blogs. By this I mean that while reader-

response criticism points to the reader's active role in meaning production and negotiation of the text, as I demonstrated in Chapters 4 and 5, both the authorial text and the readerly response on the writers' blogs suggest a re-birth of the author, where the spectacle of *the personal* dominated the content and form of the blogs. As shown on all the five glam-writers' blogs I researched, they had particular ways of constructing themselves as public personalities and were effectively 'enthusiastic participants in their own publicity campaigns' (McDougall, 2005: 103).

As a new site of communication and literary reception, the glam-writers' blog phenomenon has attracted little attention from the Chinese academy. The new technologies enable new interpersonal relationships in virtual space, including between the writers and readers. As the focus of the readers in the blogosphere shifted from the literary works to the private lives of the writers, I argued that as the glam-literature did, the establishment of the glam-writers' blogs blurred the boundaries between the public and the private, their online and offline life. The growing concern with *the personal* was manifested through both the glam-writers' self-(re)presentation and construction and the readers' engagement with these writers as celebrities in the *public* domain, at the expense of leaving the writers' works less discussed and decentred.

Drawing on a combination of literature about cybercultures (Bell 2000; Hine 2000; Holmes 1997; Paasonen 2005; Silver & Massanari 2006) and celebrity culture (Giles 2000; Marshall 1997, 2006; Moran 2000; Rojek 2001; Turner 2004), I considered factors which contributed to the greater importance of the personal, i.e. the glam-writers' private lives and trivia, in the reception of their literary works. Although the celebrity status of the glam-writers is a construction prompted by the mass media, the writers played an active role in promoting themselves and diverting readers' attention away from the literature to their personal lives. Barthes's (1977) notion of 'the death of the author' has increasingly been challenged by changes in author-reader interactions. The glam-writers' texts, along with the readers' responses on

their blogs, invited and called for a rebirth of the author.

By delineating the contents of the glam-writers' entries published between 2005 and 2009, I illustrated the means by which these writers manipulated their blogs as a mechanism for self-publicity and constructed the self/selves in a way they wanted to be defined by the public. Through the use of visual, audio, video and textual presentations on the blogs, the autobiographical presentations of their moods, emotions, feelings, experiences and everyday lives in particular, these writers become the authors of their selves quite apart from their works, and thus 'author the author' (Moran 2000). In response to an intentional and 'strategic self-disclosure' (Schau and Gilly, 2003: 400), these glam-writers are subject to the public's consumption of their private self, and perhaps the inevitably 'continuing commodification of the self' (Moran, 2000: 63). I argued that these authors as celebrities were de-individualized by their simultaneous performances of establishing blogs on the same site and by using similar strategies in capturing the readers' attention. As I also suggested, the authorial role of the glam-writers did not predetermine the readers' reactions to their blogs. The writers' deletion of certain messages and comments posted on Hong Ying's and Zhao Bo's blogs revealed that these writers could not fully 'control' reader responses and that they cared about the way in which they were viewed by the readers. The latter were again, not *passive recipients* of media messages but active participants in the co-construction of the blogs. They did not tend to be easily and only influenced by the writers' (re)presentation of themselves.

As to the reception of the literary works, my research findings showed that there were few serious comments offered by the readers on the glam-writers' works. Whilst the writers' blogs partly served as a tool for book promotions, the glam-writers only publicized their works in a declarative way without investing much in literary exchange with their readers. By showing more concern with the reactions to their personal anecdotes disclosed on the blogs and less interest in receiving comments

on their literary texts, the writers virtually directed, as their works implied, the readers' engagement to themselves as celebrated personalities and rendered their blogs' function an exhibition site where they provided the readers with glimpses of their private lives. This supports my assertion of the glam-writers' role in diverting the public's attention to *the personal* and blurring the boundaries between the public and the private.

In scrutinizing the virtual interactions between the readers and the glam-writers, I delineated a circling dynamic that operated in one plane of the seemingly private sphere. By this I mean that on one level, readers were stimulated by their curiosity about the celebrity writers' personal lives. On the other, the writers became more motivated and committed to self-disclosure in terms of mundane life trivia to keep the readers' interest. Despite a conditional intimacy between the writers and the readers, and the reality that there is always a distance between the two, and between the writers' real lives and the lives described in their texts, most readers tended to show their trust in the writers by constructing and sharing their own personal narratives on the writers' blogs. I demonstrated, on the basis of the nature of the online interactions, that the sense of intimacy between the readers and writers was, in fact, a pseudo-intimacy with little genuine interaction. Neither the writers nor the readers attempted serious or sustained interactions on the blogs, and maybe this was also not the point of these exchanges or of the blogs.

As illustrated in my analysis of the virtual interactions on the blogs, readers' one-way communication with the glam-writers showed that the writers' blogs served as a device for self-promotion rather than as a site for interaction. Most readers who took an active role in engaging with the glam-writers on their blogs were young readers pursuing their secondary or higher education, as shown in their personal narratives on the writers' blogs which gave their age and educational information. Saying this of course assumes that the readers disclosed actual information about their lives – a fact that I did not attempt to verify and that has been much discussed in the literature

on online communities (see Bell 2001; Holmes 1997; Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995). As a growing population which has both time and a moderate amount of money for entertaining themselves, this young generation represents an emerging force of consumption, and a new type of reader differing from traditional audiences of popular fictions. In comparison with the slightly older women readers I interviewed, younger readers on the writers' blogs tended to be more easily influenced by the writers' lifestyles and ways of thinking. A greater level of identification with the writers, Ann Baby in particular, was evident amongst the younger generation of Chinese readers.

Feminism, Women's Writing and Modernity in Mainland China

When discussing women's writing and its influences upon its readers, we tend to relate it to the specific historical, social and cultural context in which this writing is produced, developed, and received. In a western context, the development of women's writing is often linked to the notion of feminism. Although there is a different story of how feminism developed in China, I want to make certain connections between the glam-lit and feminism, and the receptions of both in mainland China. By building these connections, I believe, we may better understand the way in which the works by the glam-writers were produced and received in the late 1990s. I shall close this conclusion by discussing a question left by the film *Shanghai Baby* (2007)³²¹ based on Wei Hui's homonymous novel. In the closing scene set in a neon-lighted evening street in Shanghai, after returning from her heartbreaking trip to Germany where she sees her German lover Mark live a happy life with his wife and daughter, the protagonist Coco is riding her bicycle, facing towards the camera, starting to reflect upon both the destiny of a character she has constructed in her forthcoming novel and her own career path as a potential writer who has not yet found a publisher for the novel. The film ends with Coco's interior monologue asking both herself and the audience: 'Who are we, or rather who am I?' Here the protagonist continues her search for independence and self-fulfillment, instead of falling into despair after her boyfriend Tiantian's death and her German lover Mark's subsequent abandonment.

³²¹ For further information about the film, see <http://www.shanghai-baby.com/>, accessed on 10/2/2009.

The protagonist's intention of looking for a publisher implies her attempt to gain independence both professionally and psychologically, socially and financially, by focusing on her work rather than on personal relations.

What interests me as a feminist postgraduate, is the way in which the question 'Who are we, or rather who am I' is posed by the self-proclaimed feminist author Wei Hui throughout her work.³²² Despite the proclamation Wei Hui made on various occasions such as book-signing events and magazine interviews that she is a feminist and that the novel *Shanghai Baby* (1999) is written about and for modern young women,³²³ the author fails to offer a full answer to the 'feminist' question and thus shifts the focus of the conception of feminism from the authorial position to the audience. The author constructs a dilemma by representing a self-determined, powerful young woman who looks down on Chinese sexually impotent men symbolizing weak Chinese patriarchal society on the one hand, and a defiant, self-loathing woman aspiring to a western bourgeois lifestyle and inevitably being subject to the male gaze and patriarchal norms and ideologies on the other (Knight 2003; Weber 2002). What we, as the audience of the film and readers of the novel, may eventually infer from *Shanghai Baby* is a contradictory female character both aspiring to and exhausted by the search for self-identity and femininity (Ferry 2003; Lu 2008; Weber 2002).

Coco's confusion about who is a feminist or what is feminism gives voice to a common problem in the Chinese public in identifying the term feminism, and the ambivalence and controversies around the translation and conceptualization of the term. Apart from the two existing linguistic translations of feminism as *nüquan zhuyi* (women's rights or power-ism) and *nüxing zhuyi* (female or feminine-ism) (Ko and Wang, 2007: 1), Chinese scholarly research on Chinese feminism in both domestic and transnational contexts remains relatively underdeveloped in comparison with its western counterpart. Not until the hosting of the United Nations' Fourth World

³²² In the film, the original question was raised by a group of feminist students at local universities in Shanghai with whom Coco had a discussion.

³²³ See <http://edu.sina.com.cn/critique/2000-05-16/2891.shtml>, accessed on 11/4/2008.

Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, did China officially make its effort to 'internationalize', meaning to 'connect to the international track' (yu guoji jiegui), and incorporate itself into the transnational women's movement (Chow, Zhang and Wang, 2004: 164) The lack of common knowledge of feminism, in terms not only of its definition and circulation, but also an associated consciousness and ideology, has partly given rise to the hype and popularization of the glam-writers' works among the Chinese public, on the basis of problematizing 'the emergence of a sexy or sexualized feminine body as a sign of China's market modernity in the twenty-first century' (Ko and Wang, 2007: 11):

This sexualized feminine body associated with an urban bourgeois imagery erases the reality of class differentiations by evoking an essential 'femininity' and 'sexuality'. Feminism, now rendered primarily as nǚxing zhuyi (feminine-ism)...., appears to be a fashionable cause in popular discourse, embraced by writers and readers seemingly oblivious to its charged historical meanings as a legacy of the century-long quest for modernity and self-determination by China and its women (ibid).

It might be useful to re-consider the development of Chinese feminism, articulated in modern Chinese women's literature, and recognize its specificities 'as part of the Chinese experience of modernity' (Zhong, 2007: 219). The dissemination and application of feminism in China is quite different from that in the west. Toril Moi (1985) attributes her inability to apply western feminism to Chinese women's liberation to her lack of knowledge of Chinese literature. Yet, the intrinsic reason for the incompatibility of western feminism with Chinese realities may be that the former renders Chinese overall definitions and requirements of women a certain kind of 'repression', and makes certain kinds of women's traditional culture 'meaningless' (Xi, 2003: 76).

Feminism was initially introduced to China by a small group of elite women and has encountered various obstacles from different forces at different historical moments.

As Dai Jinhua comments: 'even in the academy, being a feminist is not an easy thing' (1999: 156). In the contemporary literary scene, misinterpretations and misappropriations of the term by both readers and writers, literary critics and academics, have been a pervasive phenomenon. As Barlow observes:

There is very little recognition of feminism as a serious intellectual current and a large body of speculative theory. As a result, feminine writing (writing by women) is frequently confused with feminist writing. Feminism in the Chinese context has yet to be created as a gender-specific way of thinking and accepted as an intellectual tendency (1993: 287).

This has preconditioned the framework of the reception of the glam-writers' works, and influenced the diversity of their reception and the gap not only between professional reading and lay reading, but also in the interpretation of these literary works among different generations of the Chinese public. As I illustrated in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, different generations of readers had different attitudes to these works. Younger readers were more likely to identify with these glam-writers and were more easily influenced by their works. Similar to chick lit writers in some western countries, Chinese glam-writers tended to produce a type of 'commercially successful women's writing' (Whelehan, 2005: 173) and construct narratives which 'stuck very closely to the conditions of their own lives' (ibid: 191). Chick lit may relate to the notion of third wave feminism or post-feminism. Whelehan articulates this connection as follows:

If feminism has been scrutinized and found wanting by chick lit writers, one possible conclusion is that it contains some pretty powerfully unpalatable truths for a younger generation of women, truths that are carefully evacuated from their novels (ibid: 216).

In the Chinese context, however, the emergence of glam lit is viewed as an abrupt socio-cultural phenomenon with little or no historical tie to feminism. Unlike most chick-lit novelists who may see themselves as feminists and have read the consciousness-raising novels of the 1970s written by an older feminist generation, Chinese glam-writers seemed to suddenly pick up their pens to write about their own experiences without having a consolidated background of feminist knowledge and

social context to do so.

As to the reception of this literary genre, whereas chick lit 'exerts a powerful influence on women as readers of popular fiction' (Whelehan, 2005: 217), I demonstrated that glam lit does not seem to have a significant impact on young Chinese women readers and their lives. Any impact was usually transient and disappeared when younger readers grew up. One has to relate the reception of the glam-writers' works to the specific historical and socio-political contexts of Chinese modernization, and to the Chinese reception of feminism as a whole. The controversies generated around the production and consumption of the glam-writers' works showcase the 'ambivalence', complexities and specificities of circulating 'questions of feminism, female identity, female sexuality and the meaning of the female body' in contemporary China (Zhong, 2007: 223).

In this conclusion, I have re-addressed the way in which the political, economic and social contexts of the emergence of the Chinese glam-writers have shaped the domestic reception of their literary production since the late 1990s. It is important to stress the effects of these factors and the ongoing cultural transformation on Chinese individuals, not least because readers' interpretations and perceptions of literature rely as much on 'a shared set of interpretive and narrative conventions' (Newell, 1997: 390) as writerly creativity does. In contrast to the western public, 'the relative impotence of the general public in China' (Griswold: 1993, 462) has made my research on the reception of Chinese glam-writers' works a more challenging site. My research findings demonstrated that contemporary Chinese readers cannot be homogenized, not only because of the gap between literary institutions and the context within which readers' value systems and aesthetic judgements are formed, but also because individual readers perceive and respond to literary works differently according to their past understandings of literature and personal experiences.

As a completely new site for research, the reception of contemporary Chinese glam-

writers' works, as explored by this thesis, constitutes an original contribution to research on reception and audience studies in mainland China. This thesis is also innovative in the sense that it examined the articulated effects and influences of a contemporary type of women's literature on actual Chinese readers. Such research has never been done in the Chinese context. The divergences in the reception of the glam-writers' works are of particular significance not only in mapping something of the landscape of contemporary Chinese literary reception, but also in foregrounding the existing relations between different fields of reception in mainland China. The traditional role and status of Chinese literature has been questioned and challenged by the emergence of the glam-writers. As 'a collective action' (Becker, cited in Harrington and Bielby 2001), the production, distribution and consumption of the glam-writers' works has been affected by various external factors such as the market, the mass media, and gatekeepers – publishers, editors, reviewers and critics. The writers' role has changed from a professional intellectual to a speculative commodity, of whom the spectacle of *the personal* becomes a key aspect of their production.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Chinese Literary Developments: A Brief Chronology³²⁴

Dates	Name of Period		Status of Women Writers
1994B.C.- 1766B.C.	Xia Dynasty	Earliest Times	Very few women poets/scholars emerged.
1766B.C.-1111 B.C.	Shang Dynasty		
1111B.C.-256 B.C.	Zhou Dynasty	Antiquity	
221B.C.-206 B.C.	Qin Dynasty		
206B.C.-9A.D.	West Han Dynasty	Middle Ages	
9A.D.-24A.D.	Xin Dynasty		
25-220	East Han Dynasty		
220-265	Three Kingdoms	The Epoch of First Division	
265-420	Jin Dynasty		
420-589	Division into North and South		
589-618	Sui Dynasty	The Empire of Sui and Tang	Few women writers emerged.
618-907	Tang Dynasty		
907-960	Five Dynasties	The Epoch of Second Division	
960-1279	Song Dynasty		
1279-1368	Yuan Dynasty (Mongol)	Period of Absolutism	
1368-1644	Ming Dynasty		Women's Writing Community established. Publishing houses were set up.
1644-1911	Qing Dynasty or Manchu		
1840-1842: 1856-1860:	-The First Opium War -The Second Opium War		
1912	The Chinese Republic	The Chinese Republic	
1919	May 4 th Movement		Women writers first appeared as a group. Emergence of the 'New Women' and 'New Literature'

³²⁴ This appendix is based on the books *China: A New History* by Fairbanki and Goldman, *A History of Chinese Civilization* by Gernet, and *Visitors to China: Eyewitness Accounts of Chinese History* by Pratt. See the Bibliography.

			Avant-garde writers such as Ding Ling, Lu Yin, and Bing Xin.
1937-1945	The War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression		Women's writing focused on the wars and revolution.
1949	The People's Republic of China	The People's Republic of China (PRC) Mao's Regime	Women's writing was partly influenced by western feminism and feminist movement.
1950-1953 1950:	Korean War -Treaty between the Soviet Union and the PRC		
1958-1961	Great Leap Forward		
1962	War between India and China over Himalayan frontier		
1966-1976 1976:	Cultural Revolution -Death of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai		Women's writing mainly focused on countryside life.
1977	Deng Xiaoping back in power	The Post-Mao Period	
1978-1988 1978:	Reform and Opening-up policy -One-child policy	The Reform Era/New Era	Root-seeking literature emerged in the mid-1980s. Women's writing suffered aphasia in the late 1980s and early 1990s.
1989	Tiananmen Square Massacre		
1997	Hong Kong handed over to Chinese control -Death of Deng Xiaoping		
1999	Macao handed over to Chinese control		Diaspora writing by Hong Ying and Liu Suola. Body writing, or post-70s writing by Mian Mian, Wei Hui, Zhao Bo, Zhou Jieru, etc.
2000 -			Prevalence of post-70s glam-writers. Emergence of post-80s writers.

For more information about the history of Chinese women's literature, see

1. <http://library.thinkquest.org/12255/library/dynasty/dynasty.htm>, accessed on 10/08/2007.
2. <http://www.3lian.com/zl/114/5000/5000.htm>, accessed on 10/08/2007.
3. <http://www.mugood.com/html/414/40363.htm>, accessed on 10/08/2007.
4. <http://cul.sohu.com/20060919/n245419559.shtml>, accessed on 11/08/2007.
5. http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/1/newsid_2656000/2656973.stm, accessed on 11/08/2007.

Appendix 2: The Mini-Biographies of the Chinese Glam-Writers

1. Ann Baby

Ann Baby, also known as Li Jie, born June 1975 in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, now lives in Beijing.

Ann Baby has published her writings on the Internet since October, 1998 and was famous for her novel *Gao Bie Wei An* (Farewell to Wei An, 2000). She was one of the most popular writers on the Internet in 2000. She used to work in the financial section and then in an advertising company. Now she deals with the planning and production of cultural products, and works as an editor, freelancer and column writer. She has attracted a broad attention because of her distinctive style of writing. All of her works have been on chart in the system of bookstore sales, and ranked top ten in the domestic best-sellers of literature and arts. Many of her writings have been influential among readers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Germany.

Ann Baby's blog website: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/babe>

Source: <http://baike.baidu.com/view/13678.htm>, accessed on 11/11/2007.

2. Hong Ying

Hong Ying, born 1962 in Chongqing, Sichuan Province, famous writer, poet, representative of Chinese New Woman and New Literature. She currently lives in London and Beijing.

Reared by a boat sailor's family, Hong Ying was the sixth child in a family of eight. She endured great poverty and hunger when she was a child, and spent her childhood in the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution. Her mother had to work as a brick labourer to feed the family, while her father was too ill to work. She later discovered that she was in fact the illegitimate daughter of a lover her mother took, while her father was in prison.

Hong Ying started her freelance writer's career in early 1980s. As one of the very few free-lancers at the time, she wrote both fiction and poetry. In late 1980s she studied in Lu Xun Creative Writing Academy and Fudan University. In 1991 she came to England and settled down in London, where she married Henry Zhao, a lecturer at SOAS. Her novels *K: The Art of Love* and *Summer of Betrayal*, as well as her autobiography *Daughter of Hunger* (called *Daughter of the River* in the English translation), have been translated and published into 16 languages, including major European languages such as Finnish, Polish, Israeli, and Portuguese, as well as Vietnamese. Her story collection *A Lipstick Called Red Pepper*, Fiction about Gay & Lesbian Love in China was published in Germany in 1999. She has just finished her latest novel *Ananda*, on which she has spent three years. Her fiction and poetry have won 9 major prizes in Taiwan since 1990. In mainland China she also won both the critical acclaim and readers' recognition. Her books have been at the top of the

bestseller charts, and she has been acclaimed as one of the ten most popular authors in China in 2000.

In 1999 Hong Ying's novel *K: The Art of Love* was published in Taiwan, a fictionalized account of the true story of the Chinese intellectual who became Julian Bell's lover when he was in China in the 1930s. Known only as 'K' in the letters that he wrote home to his mother, the true identity of Julian Bell's Chinese lover continues to spark controversy to this day. Already dubbed the Chinese Lady Chatterly's Lover, Hong Ying's imaginary account of the real-life love affair in the 1930s between Julian Bell, son of Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf's nephew, and Ling Shuhua, one of China's most highly regarded short-story writers, was the focus of intense legal debate and became the subject of a scandalous court case in the mainland China. The author was accused in Manchuria by Chen Xiaoying, the outraged daughter of Ling Shuhua, who died 12 years ago. The daughter has pronounced the book defamatory and is taking advantage of Chinese law, which stipulates that dead people can be protected from libel.

Denouncing the book as 'unbearably pornographic', Chen Xiaoying has brought a lawsuit against Hong Ying and the two Chinese publications that have carried extracts of the novel for causing 'spiritual damage'. 'It is very obscene,' she told the UK's Observer at the start of the trial in June 2002. 'There is no law in England to protect ancestors. But in China the dead cannot be slandered.' This startling case highlights the fluid boundary between biography, artistic license and China's totalitarian legal system. If Hong Ying loses, she faces a fine of 200,000 yuan (\$24,000) the banning of the book for an unbelievable 100 years and the seizure of all her property in China. 'If the court bans K from being published,' Hong Ying has announced, 'it would be a huge step backwards for modern Chinese writing. It would mean a return to a chaotic, conservative and totalitarian state.'

Hong Ying's blog website: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/hongyinghongying>

Sources: <http://www.marionboyars.co.uk/Authors%20and%20gen.%20info/ying.html>, and <http://baike.baidu.com/view/78256.htm>, accessed on 12/11/2007.

3. Mian Mian

Mian Mian, born August 28, 1970 in Shanghai, China, is a contemporary young Chinese writer and a promoter of Shanghai's local music.

Mian Mian began writing at the age of sixteen. In 1987, She left school without finishing her secondary education; and in 1989, went alone to a small city in southern China. Mian Mian then spent five years there, however she never talks about that period of her life to anyone. Mian Mian returned to Shanghai in 1994.

There she entered a drug rehabilitation center for the last time, and again took up writing after her discharge from the center. In 1996 Mian Mian acted as a DJ at Shanghai's Cotton Club, and in the following year, she began to publish some of her short stories and novelettes in *Xiao Shuo Jie* (Novel Circle) and several other widely

distributed Chinese literary magazines. Mian Mian's life experiences gave form to many of her works' central characters: singers, drug addicts, prostitutes, homosexuals, lunatics, hoodlums, young degenerates, and self-proclaimed artists. She became the first Chinese writer to ever describe drugs and drug related life. Her characteristic flavor of "cruel youth" and her serious attitude towards self-reflection quickly attracted a large following of young readers. In July 1997, with help from the New Century Publishing House in Hongkong, Mian Mian published her first collection of short stories titled *La La La*.

In January 2000, the Zhong Guo Xi Ju Publishing House and the authoritative literary magazine *Shou Huo* (Harvest) simultaneously published *Tang* (Candy), her first novel in Mainland China. The novel sent a strong ripple through the country's literary world and quickly became a best seller, with a large number of unauthorized copies produced through out the country. This was quickly followed by her collection of short stories titled *Mei Ge Hao Hai Zi Dou You Tang Chi* (Every Good Child Deserves To Eat Candy) by Huashan Publishers and *ACID LOVER* by Shanghai Sanlian Publishing House. In April 2000, the government officially banned her book *Candy* followed by the banning of all of her books. However, by this time hundreds of thousands of pirated copies have already been circulated through small private bookstores and street vendors. Mian Mian's *La La La* was translated into German and Italian, her *Candy* was translated into English, French, Dutch, Spanish, Greek, and Portuguese. Starting in 1997, Mian Mian has been pushing electronic music into the clubs of various Chinese cities. She has planned numerous large-scale dance parties, some of which invited internationally renowned DJs to perform. In the process, Mian Mian has established herself as the only female dance party organizer in China. Naturally, she has a large party following through out the country.

In 2001, Mian Mian began to involve herself with filmmaking. In her first such work *Wo Men Hai Pa* (Shanghai Panic), she filled the roles of screenwriter, actor, and co-producer. Mian Mian plans to continue her cooperation with director Andrew Chen (Chen Yu Su) to incorporate all of her written works into various film projects. She is also planning a movie of her own, with herself acting as the director.

Mian Mian's latest novels *She Jiao Wu* (Social Dance) and *Xiong Mao* (Panda Sex) were published in 2002 and 2004 respectively.

Mian Mian's blog: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/mianmian>

Sources: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mian_Mian, <http://www.china-fun.net/book/author/120070615/1204645.shtml>, and http://www.modernsky.com/bands/mianmian/mm_file.htm, accessed on June 25, 2007.

4. Wei Hui

Zhou Wei Hui, born January 1973 in Yuyao, Zhejiang Province, used to work as journalist, editor, radio station host, waitress in a coffee shop, drum player, etc. She currently lives in Shanghai.

Wei Hui studied Chinese Language and Literature at Fudan University in Shanghai, after a year of military training. Her first short story published at the age of 21. Her first novel *Shanghai Baobei* (Shanghai Baby), after being number one best seller overnight in 2000 in China, was banned due to its explicit sexual scenes and bold portrait of china's new generation, and the publishing house was closed down for 3 months. *Shanghai Baby* became instantly an international best seller published in 34 languages over 45 countries for over 6 millions copies. It is so far the most sold Chinese contemporary literature. *Shanghai Baby*, a same-titled major feature film based on this book has been released in early 2007.

Wo de chan (Marrying the Buddha), her second novel came out in 2005 and became another international best seller. The heroine Coco, a representative of socially and sexually liberated Chinese young women, continues her journey of self-discovery on female's sexuality and modern spirituality, this time, marrying Buddha.

Wei Hui has been regarded by international medias as a spokeswoman of Chinese new generation especially Chinese young women, she and her works have been widely appearing on all major medias such as The New York Times, The New Yorker, Time Magazine, CNN, U.S.A Today, BBC, The Times, The Sunday Times, Economist, Stern, Welt Am Sonntag, Asahi, NHK, Yomiuri, Le Monde, Le Figaro, etc.

Wei Hui's other novels include *Hu Die De Jian Jiao* (The Shriek of Butterfly), *Shui Zhong De Chu Nu* (Virgin In The Water), *Xiang Wei Hui Na Yang Feng Kuang* (Crazy Like Wei Hui), *Yu Wang De Shou Qiang* (Desire Pistol).

Wei Hui's blog: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/weihui>

Sources: <http://www.china-fun.net/book/author/120070613/1211328.shtml>, <http://goldnets.myrice.com/wh/page-4-10.htm>, <http://www.roshui.com/nxwx/weih/whml.htm>, <http://www.weihui.info/new/biography.htm>, and http://www.white-collar.net/01-author/w/17-wei_h/, accessed on 12/9/2007.

5. Zhao Bo

Zhao Bo, born July 1971 in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province, now lives in Beijing.

Zhao Bo began to publish her poetry, prose and novels when she was in high school, but stopped writing as she studied and worked away from her hometown. She did not start writing again until 1996. She has published more than eight hundred thousand words of her novels and prose in domestic newspapers and periodicals.

Zhao Bo's novels include *Beijing liu shui* (Beijing Glide), *Jia qi* (Vacation), *Kuai le wu zui* (The Happiness is Innocent), *Qing se wu yu* (Words of Love Lust and Object), and *Lu shang de lu* (Dew on the Road).

Zhao Bo's blog: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/zhaobo>

Sources: <http://www.rongshuxia.com/channels/zj/zhaobo.htm>, accessed on 12/9/2007.

6. Zhou Jieru

Zhou Jieru, born 1976 in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province, is a member of Chinese Writer's Association. She currently lives in the USA.

Zhou Jieru started writing in 1991, and has published more than one million characters by now. Her most well-known novel *Xiao Yao de Wang* (The Net of a Little Lamia) (my translation) made her famous immediately, and was the first internet romance created by the professional writer.

Zhou Jieru's other novels include *Women gandian shenme ba* (Let's Do Something), *Ni Teng Ma* (Are You in Pain), *Chang Xiu Shan Wu* (Long Sleeve Dances Well) (my translation), and *Tianshi youle yuwang* (When an Angel Has a Lust) (my translation). Some of her novels have been translated into English and German.

Sources: <http://www.sinology.cn/main/book1/mjwj/zz/zhoujieru/000.htm>, and <http://book.jqcq.com/product/102008.html>, accessed on 12/12/2007.

Appendix 3: The Interview Schedule

Interviewing Questions

Section 1: Openings

A brief introduction of the aim, nature, methodologies and ethics of the research.

Could you introduce yourself to me so that I can have an idea what kind of person you are, and what interests you have?

Do you mind my asking about your age? / How old are you now?

What is your marital status?

Tell me more about your educational background.

- (If yes) What is your major?
 Which university are you studying at?
 What subject do you like most?
 What are you going to do after you graduate?
 What kind of goals or ambitions do you have for your future career?
 (Role in the team? Career path? Salary expectation? Promotion
 opportunity? Welfare consideration?)

- (If no) Tell me about your work.
 What is your occupation?
 Where do you work?
 What kind of role do you have?
 What do you like and dislike about your current job?
 Could you tell me more about your work experience?
 What kind of hopes and aspirations do you have for the future? (Buying
 a property or car? Having a holiday? On a quality business trip? Being
 sent to work abroad?)

What do you like to do in your leisure time? What hobbies do you have?

How do you get along with your friends/classmates/colleagues? For example, how and where do you normally spend your weekends or holidays, with family or socialize yourself outside?

Tell me a little bit more about your family. What kind of persons are your parents? What do they do? Do you have brothers or sisters? What are they like?

Section 2: Reading Habits/History

What do you like to read?

How often do you read?

What kind of books do you usually read?

What genre(s) are you most interested in?

How did you first get to read novels?

What and whose novels have you read recently?

What books have you most enjoyed?

At the very beginning of this century, there was a group of women writers labeled 'beauty writers', 'glam-lit writers', 'fashionable women writers', or 'new new generation writers'. Some representative figures are Mian Mian, Wei Hui, Ann Baby, Zhao Bo, Hong Ying, Zhou Jieru, Wei Wei, etc. What do you think about these women writers?

Which of these writers and whose works have you come across? How did you get to know them?

Section 3: Favourite Writers/Works/CharactersThemes

Tell me about your favourite woman writer/women writers. Could you say more about her/them?

What do you like about her/their work?

Which and whose novel(s) do you like best? Tell me why.

When was your first time to read the novel(s)?

What version did you read in terms of the medium, i.e. internet or an actual book?

Why did you decide to buy or read the book(s)?

What was your immediate impression of the novel(s) when you first read it?

Did you ever re-read the novel(s)? If yes, tell me when and what was your second-

time reaction and response to the novel(s)? If no, why not?

Tell me about one of the most impressive factors or scenes in the novel which affected you in the process of reading and reception. Could you explain in more detail?

Among those novels you have read, which novel has influenced or changed your way of looking at things and the world around us, or any aspect of your life after you read it? Could you tell me how?

Could you tell me how your attitudes towards these women writers and their work have developed? When was the moment in which your views of the novels mostly changed? How would you like to define and explain these changes?

What is your favourite character in the novel?

What kind of relations do you think may exist between the author of the novel and the character in that novel?

How does the author's life relate to the character's life?

What theme(s) or topic(s) do you find most interesting in these glam-writers' novels? Why?

As a contemporary reader who was born in the similar decade to these authors, what sort of resonance, if any, has been created with the authors in the process of reading and reception? Explain what these resonances are.

Section 4: Readers' Perceptions/Real Life Experiences/Personal Narratives

What is your attitude towards the lifestyles described in Wei Hui and Mian Mian's novels?

How would you describe the impacts these writers' work have on you, your life, and your views of value and the world?

Do you feel any similarities between you, your life and those women writers and their lives? If yes, what are they? If no, what are the differences which you think distinguish them from you most?

How often do you go shopping? Do you buy things because of their brands or their use?

How often do you go to pubs and clubs? Whom do you usually go with? What do you usually do in the pubs?

When do you usually listen to music? What music do you like to listen to? What do you think the music can give to you?

Do you drink alcohol? How often and how much do you drink? When and where do you usually feel like drinking?

Do you smoke? How often? On what occasions do you most feel like smoking?

Have you even taken any kind of drugs? If yes, when? How much did you take? Why did you decide to take drugs? Explain the consequence of taking drugs, the reason why stopped taking drugs and how.

Have you ever had sex with people other than your boyfriend or husband? What is the relationship between both of you? How did you keep the relationship after the sex? What was your immediate feeling after the sex?

Section 5: Readers' Online Participation on the Writers' Blogs

Do you visit writers' blogs?

Among the aforementioned women writers, whose blogs have you visited so far?

Why do you go to their blogs?

Which blog(s) do you like best? Why?

What do you usually do when you visit their blogs?

Which section(s) of the blogs do you most frequently go to? Why?

In what situation would you like to add comments on or leave messages to the writers' blogs? What kind of questions or enquires do you raise?

What kind(s) of topics attract you most in these writers' blogs (both in writers' posts and other readers' comments)?

What is your reaction to the women writers' blogs and readers' participation in the blogs? Could you give more comments on it?

Besides the writers' blogs and personal websites, what other online channels have

you used to access these women writers and their work?

What do you think about fandom of the writers? Whom do you think you are a fan of?
Tell me why.

Have you ever established your own blog or personal website? If yes, what does it look like? If no, why not?

Section 6: Ending

Thank all the interviewees.

Questions and enquiries.

Confidentiality and consent matters.

The end.

Appendix 4: The Mini-Biographies of the Women Readers

F1: Liu Liu (Kitty) 24, born in Zhengzhou City, Henan Province, was single and had no children, although she was planning to have a family. She was the only child in her family. Her parents divorced in her childhood. She graduated from the University of East Anglia in 2006, with a BA in Society, Culture and Media. Kitty worked full-time as a consultant in an employment and investment migration company in Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province. She was interviewed at a local coffee bar opposite her workplace. Her best-liked Chinese woman writer was Hong Huang.

F2: Lin Yunyun 28, born in Hainan Province, was married and had no children. She had a sister. She graduated from Sun Yat-sen University in Guangdong Province, with a Bachelor degree in Business English/Business Management. Yunyun worked full-time as an adviser in an employment and investment migration company in Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province. She was interviewed at a local coffee bar opposite her workplace. Her best-liked Chinese women writers were Su Hei and Qiong Yao.

F3: Li Qianqian 21, born in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province, was single and had no children. She had two sisters and one brother. She was studying in her second year towards her Bachelor in Marketing at Changzhou Institute of Technology. She was interviewed at my home. Her best-liked Chinese women writers were Zhang Ailing, Li Bihua and Ann Baby.

F4: Hu Nina (Fiona) 26, born in Shanghai, was single and had no children. She was the only child in her family. She graduated from Shanghai International Studies University, with a Bachelor in Tourism with English. Fiona had worked full-time as an assistant manager in the Shanghai branch of a UK travel company, but quit the job not long before the interview. She was currently unemployed and was interviewed at a local hotel room. Her best-liked Chinese woman writer was Yi Shu.

F5: Zhang Nan 24, born in Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province, was single and had no children. She was the only child in her family. Her parents divorced in her childhood. She graduated from the East China Normal University, with a Bachelor in Psychology. Nan worked full-time as an administrator and later as the secretary of a General Manager in a hotel in Shanghai, and was preparing for her third job to work as an office administrator in a sales office in Suzhou Industrial Park. She was interviewed at a local coffee bar. Her best-liked Chinese woman writer was Chen Danyan.

F6: Kong Xiaoyan 26, born in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province, was single and had no children. She was the only child in her family. She graduated from Xuzhou Normal University, with a BA in Music Pedagogy. Xiaoyan worked full-time as a reporter/editor of the *Peng City Evening Newspaper* in Xuzhou. She was interviewed at a local coffee bar together with another two interviewees Lu Chuanchuan and Zhu

Qianqian. Her best-liked Chinese women writers were Ann Baby, Rao Xueman, and Zhang Xiaoxian.

F7: Lu Chuanchuan 25, born in Shangdong Province, was single and had no children. She had a sister. She graduated from the University of Yangzhou, with a BA in Chinese. Chuanchuan worked as a secretary in a real estate company, and then full-time as a reporter/editor at the *Xuzhou Daily Newspaper*. She was interviewed at the same coffee bar with Kong Xiaoyan and Zhu Qianqian. Her best-liked Chinese women writers were Cang Yue, Chi Zijian, Ann Baby, and Zhang Ailing.

F8: Cai Han 23, born in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province, was single and had no children. She was the only child in her family. She graduated from Xuzhou Normal University, with a BA in Broadcasting and TV Journalism. Han worked full-time as a journalist at the *Xuzhou Daily Newspaper*. She was interviewed separately in a local hotel room. She did not specify her best-liked Chinese women writers.

F9: Zhu Qianqian 25, born in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province, was married and had no children. She had a sister. She graduated from Xuzhou Normal University, with a BA in Broadcasting and TV Journalism. Qianqian worked full-time as a journalist at the *Xuzhou Daily Newspaper*. She was interviewed in a hotel room. She was the classmate of Cai Han and Kong Xiaoyan, and the colleague of Lu Chuanchuan. Her best-liked Chinese women writers were Zhang Ailing and San Mao.

F10: Liu Yi (Karen) 25, born in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, was single and had no children. She was the only child in her family. She graduated from the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade, with a BA in Business English. Karen worked full-time as a sales representative in the Shanghai branch of a Korean petrochemical company. She was interviewed in a coffee bar in Changzhou. Her best-liked Chinese woman writer was Huo Da.

F11: Jia Le (Milk) 25, born in Nantong City, Jiangsu Province, was single and had no children, although she was planning to have a family. She was the only child in her family. She graduated from the University of Nanjing with a Bachelor in Law, and gained her Masters in Law at the National University of Singapore. Milk worked full-time as a Legal Executive in Singapore. She was interviewed in a coffee bar in Changzhou. Her best-liked Chinese woman writer was Yi Shu.

F12: Hu Zhilan (Molly) 27, born in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, was divorced and had no children. She was the only child in her family. She graduated from the Unitech Institute of Technology, New Zealand, with a BA in Linguistics. Molly worked full-time as an Assistant General Manager in her family-owned enterprise in Changzhou, later as a supervisor in a language training company in Shanghai, and now worked full-time as Executive Director in a translation and training organization in Changzhou. She was interviewed in her workplace in Changzhou. Her best-liked

Chinese woman writer was Tie Ning.

F13: Chang Lijun 22, born in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, was single and had no children. She was the only child in her family. She was studying in her third year towards her BSc degree in Communication Engineering at the University of Changchun. She was interviewed at my home. Her best-liked Chinese woman writer was Qiong Yao.

F14: Zhang Chen 26, born in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, was single and had no children. She was the only child in her family. She graduated from the Hohai University, with a Bachelor in Business Administration, and was currently doing her Masters degree in Comparative Education at the East China Normal University in Shanghai. Chen worked part-time as a reporter at the *Changzhou Daily Newspaper*, *Guangming Daily Newspaper*, and *Shanghai Education Magazine*. She was interviewed in a coffee bar in Shanghai. Her best-liked Chinese woman writer was Zhang Ailing.

F15: Wang Yunjie 25, born in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, was single and had no children. She was the only child in her family. She graduated from the University of Suzhou, with a BSc degree in Accounting and Auditing. Yunjie worked full-time as an accountant in the Shanghai branch of a Taiwanese company. She was interviewed in a hotel room in Shanghai. Her best-liked Chinese woman writer was Zhang Xiaoxian.